



Mills & Boon

THE LONELY SHORE

Anne Weale



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When Jenny, with youthful enthusiasm, was considering Clare's chances of marriage, she offered her a generous selection of men to choose from: "There's Jim Foster, the grocer's son, and Peter Andrews who has a farm on the other side of the village and Paul Mallinson who lives at the Hall. He's absolutely smashing and very rich. He has two cars and a butler and a gold cigarette case." It never occurred to Jenny to add her uncle David, Clare's employer, to the list. For Uncle David, though handsome and eligible and not so old, disliked and distrusted women and had no intention of getting married. But in spite of the attractions of Mr. Mallinson and his cigarette case, it was with David, by a perverse trick of fate, that Clare fell in love.

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Clare was pretty and kind and capable, and more than one eligible young man would have been glad to win her heart. So it was by a perverse trick of fate that she had to fall in love with David, who distrusted women and had no intention of ever getting married.

THE LONELY SHORE

BY
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All the characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the Author, and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the Author, and all the incidents are pure invention.

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*There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society, where none intrudes,
By the deep sea, and music in its roar.*

BYRON

CHAPTER I

As the bus jolted along the dusty coast road Clare reflected dryly that, in her desire to escape from London, she had certainly found her way to the extreme opposite of the smoky, bustling, overcrowded metropolis.

For several miles now they had not passed a cottage and, after the lush green meadows and pretty woodland of the home counties through which she had travelled earlier in the day, the vast expanse of salt marshes and sand-dunes had a wild, desolate air.

The only other passengers were a stout countrywoman clasping a laden shopping bag on her ample lap and an old man in leather gaiters who puffed steadily at a blackened brier pipe, staring at Clare with rheumy blue eyes as if she were some kind of freak. Presently they both got out at a crossroads, and the bus rattled on beside the seemingly endless marshes.

At last they came to a straggling village and drew up outside a public-house.

"This is your stop, miss!" The conductor handed down her suitcase and canvas grip.

The only person in sight was a small boy, who informed her that Creek House was just a step up the road. The "step" proved to be a good mile, and, arriving at the white gate which the boy had mentioned, she set down her cases and rubbed her aching wrists.

As she walked up the drive a large Boxer dog emerged from a shrubbery and bounded exuberantly towards her, its absurd stub of tail making mock of its powerful chest and aggressive muzzle.

The doorbell appeared to be out of order and, having knocked several times without hearing any signs of move-

ment inside, Clare left her luggage in the porch and walked round the house in search of a back door. She had telegraphed her time of arrival, so presumably there was someone on the premises to greet her.

The gravelled path led on to a lawn, and there, beneath a spreading beech tree, sat an old lady and a schoolgirl. The old lady was sitting at an easel, and the child, who wore a bathing-suit and a shady straw hat, was evidently posing for her. Somehow the scene was quite unexpected, and Clare wondered if she had come to the wrong house, after all.

Then the Boxer, which had been breathing heavily round her ankles, gave a sudden bark, and artist and model looked up.

"Good afternoon. This is Creek House, isn't it?" Clare asked.

They both stared at her in a startled fashion until the child said, "Are you Miss Drake?"

"Yes," Clare smiled uncertainly. "I sent a telegram to say I would be arriving at four, but perhaps you didn't get it."

"I expect Uncle David stuck it in his pocket and forgot to tell us," the child said. "Have you been pounding on the front door? The bell doesn't work."

"So I gathered," Clare said dryly.

"Titian hair!" the old lady said suddenly. "Perfect Titian hair!" She was gazing at the dark red hair which Clare wore in a neat coil at the nape of her neck.

"Is it dyed?" she asked sharply.

"Why no!"

"No, no, of course not. That glorious colour never came out of a bottle," the old lady said quickly. "I shall make you the subject of my next portrait, Miss . . . er . . . ?"

"Drake," Clare supplied.

"What extraordinary good fortune that you should have Titian hair, Miss Drake. I tried one of the village

girls, you know, but her hair was that dreadful carrotty red and she had acne as well – most uninspiring, poor dear.”

“Are you hungry?” the child interrupted. “We’ve just had tea, so I should think the pot is still quite warm. There’s a slice of cake somewhere about if Josh hasn’t sneaked it.”

She looked about and seized on a package of grease-proof paper lying on the grass.

“Yes, here it is, and the tea-pot is under Aunt Leo’s chair. We have to wrap the cake up because there’s wasps’ nest in the wall over there.”

Since it was evident that she was not expected to stand on ceremony, Clare sat down in a spare deck-chair and poured herself out some tea. There happened to be a third cup on the tray; originally intended, no doubt, for the absent Uncle David. In the middle of her first bite of cake she realised that they were staring at her again in that mildly perplexed fashion. She knew that her grey shantung suit and white shoes were hardly suitable for everyday life in a remote Norfolk village, but they could scarcely have expected her to travel from London in slacks and beach sandals.

To distract their embarrassingly frank scrutiny she said, “I’m afraid I don’t know your names.”

The old lady gave a tinkling laugh. “Oh dear, how very remiss of us,” she said gaily. “I fear you will find us shockingly uncivilised, my dear. I am Leonora Lancaster, and this is my great-niece, Jenny Clifford.”

“Can we call you by your Christian name?” Jenny asked, scratching a midge bite on one skinny bare leg. Her skin was nut brown, and a scatter of freckles spilled over her bony forehead and snub nose.

“If you wish. My name is Clare.”

“It suits you,” Miss Lancaster said. “I always think of Clares as being very calm and composed, a little regal.

Are you a calm person?"

"I don't know," Clare said uncertainly.

"You'll need to be," Jenny said impishly. "Uncle David gets into the most fearful flaps when he loses his notes or his pipe. Sometimes it takes *hours* to soothe him!"

"Is he at home now?" Clare asked. "I think perhaps I ought to—"

"Oh gosh, no. He's out on the marsh studying *Artemisia maritima*. He won't be back till supper. Can you sail?"

Clare shook her head.

"Uncle David is teaching me to sail the *Curlew*," Jenny said. "He'll teach you, too, if you like."

Miss Lancaster offered Clare a cigarette, and fitted her own into a long ivory holder. Although she appeared to be in her late sixties, her manner belied her white hair and wrinkled cheeks. She had bright blue eyes matched by her cotton painting smock, and several handsome rings flashed on her still flexible hands.

"Jenny is spending the summer with us," she explained. "My niece's husband is in the consular service in Siam, so it is quite impossible for her to spend all the school holidays with her parents."

"I've got a pair of Siamese silver ear-rings for when I grow up," Jenny said. "I'll show them to you when we go indoors."

"Perhaps Clare would like to see her room now, my poppet. Why don't you take her up?" Miss Lancaster suggested.

With the dog Josh loping behind them they went indoors.

"We've put you in the room next to mine," Jenny said, leading the way upstairs when Clare had collected her baggage from the porch. "I'm afraid the boiler makes terrible gurgly noises in the night, but you'll soon get used to it."

She had none of the giggling shyness common to children of her age, and Clare was a little amused by the mistress-of-the-house air with which she threw open the door at the end of the landing.

The bedroom was small, with a sloping ceiling and old-fashioned, painted furniture, but bright curtains fluttered at the window and a bowl of June roses stood on the dressing-table, filling the room with their delicate fragrance.

"You can see the creek from here," Jenny said. "The tide is out now, but you'll hear the water lapping against the banks tonight."

Clare sniffed the sharp sea-tang carried on the summer breeze. After the stale, petrol-laden London air, it was deliciously fresh and invigorating.

"Can I watch you unpack?" Jenny asked.

"Yes, of course." Clare took off her jacket and unlocked her suitcase. While she hung her dresses in the wardrobe and folded her underclothes in the drawers of the tallboy, Jenny chatted companionably about the village and its inhabitants.

"Uncle David has had one secretary already, you know," she said presently. "Her name was Winifreda Bunberry. She was absolutely ghastly, so he got rid of her and wrote to Uncle James in London asking him to find a proper one."

"What was so ghastly about Miss Bunberry?" Clare asked, laughing.

"Oh, she was terribly prim and stuffy and *terrified* of Josh." Jenny put an affectionate arm round the dog's neck. "And he's the sloppiest dog in Norfolk, you know. He wouldn't hurt a beetle, would you, darling?"

"Well, I hope I pass muster," Clare said. "At least, I'm not afraid of Josh."

Jenny eyes her thoughtfully. "Actually you're much better than we expected," she said with engaging can-

dour. "Have you been a secretary a long time? You look quite young."

"I'm twenty-six and I've been working for eight years."

Clare put her portable radio on the bedside table.

"Aren't you going to get married?" Jenny enquired.

Clare laughed. "I hope so. If somebody nice asks me!"

"There are some quite nice men here," Jenny observed solemnly. "There's Jim Foster, the grocer's son, and Peter Andrews who has a farm on the other side of the village, and Paul Mallinson who lives at the Hall. He's absolutely smashing and very rich. He has two cars and a butler and a gold cigarette-case."

"That must be fun." Clare hid a grin at this innocent catalogue of Mr. Mallinson's matrimonial assets. "Can I wash my hands?" she asked.

Jenny slipped down from the window-seat. "I'll show you the bathroom."

When Clare had washed and retouched her make-up, they went down to the sitting-room, where Miss Lancaster was now ensconced in an armchair and listening to the six o'clock news. When the bulletin was over the old lady suggested that they should have a glass of sherry before supper.

"What made you take this post, my dear?" she asked.

"I was tired of living in a city," Clare said. "I was brought up in the country, and when I saw the advertisement in *The Times*, I thought it was an opportunity to get back."

"I told her about Miss Bunberry, Aunt Leo," Jenny said.

"A dreadful woman!" Miss Lancaster remarked with an expression of acute distaste. "Of course my nephew is not perhaps the easiest of employers, but no doubt his brother explained that to you at the interview."

"I gathered that Mr. Lancaster didn't suffer fools gladly," Clare said, smiling.

"Miss Bunberry was a complete fool," the old lady said bluntly. "However, you look a capable girl, and I dare say you won't burst into tears if my nephew flies off the handle occasionally."

At that moment a strident female voice from another part of the house informed them that supper was ready. Miss Lancaster led the way to the dining-room, and as they sat down a massive middle-aged woman in a print dress bustled through from the kitchen with a large ham on a willow pattern plate.

This was Hilda, the family treasure, and her speculative appraisal of Clare was even more disconcerting than that of Miss Lancaster and Jenny.

"Late again," Hilda said irritably when she had shaken hands. "Mr. David will be late for his own funeral if he don't take care."

"I expect he'll be in soon," Miss Lancaster said mildly.

"A good thing it isn't hot supper tonight," Hilda said sourly on her way out.

Clare would have enjoyed the excellent salad which accompanied the ham if she had not been slightly nervous of meeting her new employer on his return from studying *Artemisia maritima*, whatever that might be.

Her previous employers had been business men, and she was not sure what it would be like to work for a distinguished botanist with, it appeared, an uncertain temper. His brother, who had conducted a proxy interview in London, was a barrister; a slightly pompous yet kindly and extremely courteous man. He had explained that David Lancaster was compiling a book on coastal plant life, and needed an efficient secretary for an approximate period of four months. Clare had admitted frankly that she had no botanical knowledge, and James Lancaster had said that this did not matter so long as she was a good shorthand-typist and did not mind erratic working hours. The salary was excellent, considering that full board

would be provided, and the thought of four summer months by the sea had decided her. She had accepted the post.

Her mental picture of Mr. Lancaster was of an extremely learned, irascible middle-aged scholar, so that when someone came whistling across the lawn and a tall, dark-haired man in his early thirties appeared at the french windows, she took him for a friend of the family – possibly the “smashing” Paul Mallinson whom Jenny had mentioned.

“You’re fifteen minutes late, David,” Miss Lancaster said severely. “Hilda is very cross with you. This is my nephew,” she added to Clare. “David, this is Miss Clare Drake.”

Clare choked on a lettuce leaf. If she had been surprised by the old lady and Jenny, she was completely taken off guard by her employer. He had nothing at all in common with her preconception of him.

He was very tall and loosely built, with close-cropped black hair and a deep tan. In his faded shirt and salt-stained denim trousers he looked more like a seaman than an authority on plants.

They shook hands. His grip was firm, and she noticed that his palm had a hard, dry texture.

“Miss Drake says she sent a telegram,” Miss Lancaster said.

“Oh lord, yes. I stuck it in my pocket and forgot to tell you. Did you have any trouble finding the house?” he asked Clare.

“No, a small boy in the village told me the way.”

“If you’ll excuse me, I’ll get cleaned up,” he said.

“Why did you choke and look startled when you saw Uncle David?” Jenny asked when he had left the room.

Clare hesitated. “I expected Mr. Lancaster to be much older,” she replied.

“He’s thirty-one,” Jenny informed her. “His birthday

was last week. We took him over to Sheringham to the pictures, didn't we, Aunt Leo? And we had a gorgeous winkie supper afterwards."

"Yes, and you were sick half the night," Hilda said tartly, coming in with a blancmange surrounded by strawberries.

"Well, it was worth it," Jenny asserted. "I don't mind being sick on winkies. Besides, Uncle David gave me some rum to settle my tummy. Do you like rum, Clare?"

"I don't think I've ever had any," Clare answered.

"Uncle David drinks gallons. He says it keeps out the cold and fortifies the nerves." Jenny gazed rapturously at the strawberries which her aunt had just passed to her.

"In spite of that slanderous statement, I am not an alcoholic, Miss Drake," David Lancaster said, tweaking Jenny's hair as he passed her chair. He had changed into flannels and a thick sweater.

"She says we may call her Clare," Jenny told him.

"Indeed." He sat down at the head of the table and carved himself some ham. "What part of the country do you come from?"

"Somerset," Clare said. "My parents had a farm near Wells until I was twelve."

"You'll find this a bleak coast in comparison with the West Country. So far it has been an exceptionally fine summer, but on a bad day we get the full force of the northerly gales."

"I hope you brought plenty of warm clothes, my dear," Miss Lancaster said. "The air is very bracing and the nights are often chilly even in midsummer."

"Yes, Mr. Lancaster's brother warned me of that," Clare said.

"She has a bra made of yellow lace," Jenny announced admiringly.

Clare flushed slightly. Jenny looked like being something of an *enfant terrible*.

After the meal, Lancaster asked her to accompany him to the study to discuss her work. As soon as he opened the door she made a mental note that her first job would be to have a thorough spring cleaning. The room was chaotic. Books and papers littered every available space, and a steel filing cabinet in the corner bulged with disordered documents. A large shrimping net and a coil of rope had been tossed on to the armchair, and an aquarium full of seaweed stood on the desk.

Lancaster swept the armchair clear and gestured for her to sit down. He made no apology for the turmoil, and Clare guessed that he was quite unaware of it.

"I'm afraid the typewriter is rather an ancient model," he said, indicating a battered-looking machine on a table by the window. "Between my last secretary's departure and your arrival, I've made a fair number of notes, so I think you could spend the first couple of days typing them out before we start work on the main draft. My writing is reasonably legible, but if there is anything you aren't sure of you had better consult me. Some of the Latin names are a bit tricky."

He took a pipe from a jar on the mantelshelf and filled it from a stained leather pouch.

"You'll find I work in fits and starts, Miss Drake. It largely depends on the weather. While this fine spell lasts I shall be out on the marshes most of the day, but we can make up for lost time when it rains."

"What about your correspondence, Mr. Lancaster?" Clare asked. "I take it you wish me to deal with that also?"

"There isn't a great deal. If I've any business letters I'll dictate them after breakfast, and so long as you catch the four o'clock post you can do them when it suits you. Oh, one other thing. I'm preparing a paper for the British Ecological Society next month, and I shall want that typed out and several copies made. Now, I think that's

all. We'll have our coffee in the sitting-room."

Jenny went to bed at half-past eight, and soon afterwards Clare said good night. As her employer opened the door for her, she thought she saw a hint of displeasure in his glance. No doubt, after his dissatisfaction with the erstwhile Miss Bunberry, he was wary of secretaries and was dubious of her efficiency.

In her room, Clare changed into a house-coat and curled up on the window-seat to write to her brother about her arrival at Creek House.

Hal was her twin, the elder by twenty minutes, and although he had been in Kenya for the past year, they exchanged letters regularly, for there was a strong bond of affection between them. Their parents had been killed in a car crash while they were still children, and Hal and Clare had gone to live with a maiden aunt in London until they were old enough to earn their livings – he as a civil engineer and she as a secretary.

"The house overlooks a creek and a vast expanse of marsh," she wrote. "It is wonderfully quiet and peaceful after London, and I can hear the sea beating in the distance. Of course this is only a temporary post, but I shall avoid going back to London unless I am forced to do so."

She paused, looking round the little room. Already she felt at home, with a curious sense of security that she had never really felt since she and Hal had been tragically uprooted from the farm in Somerset.

When she had given notice to her former employer and explained her new job, he had thought her mad.

"But what are you going to do at the end of the four months, Miss Drake?" he had asked, loath to lose a secretary who combined efficiency, discretion and an attractive appearance.

"I don't know," Clare had admitted. It was impossible to explain to him her sudden longing for the countryside,

for the placid closely-knit atmosphere of village life.

Now, with the sea-wind whispering in the creeper outside her window and the swish of the tide filling the creek, she knew she had been right to come.

Finishing her letter, she looked out into the darkness. Suddenly a door opened below her and Miss Lancaster's tinkling laugh drifted up.

Clare lit a cigarette and made a note to go into the village tomorrow for a petrol capsule for her lighter. Then her attention was arrested by David Lancaster's voice saying curtly, "Well, I suppose we shall have to put up with her now that she's here, but it's the last time I shall ask James to find a typist for me."

"But, my dear David, she's charming!" Miss Lancaster's words carried clearly on the night air. "That wonderful hair and those slanting golden eyes!"

"She could be bald and cross-eyed for all I care," he said brusquely. "What I want is efficiency – not glamour!"

"Nonsense, you were always complaining that the Bunberry woman was all gums and tombstone teeth," his aunt retorted. "Besides, even if this girl is unusually attractive, it doesn't follow that she is not efficient. I think she seems most intelligent and capable."

Clare had not intended to eavesdrop, but Lancaster's disparaging tone had stung her and she paused in the act of closing the window to hear what his reply would be.

"It beats me what she has come here for," he said. "She can hardly expect to catch a husband in a place like Clint, although I dare say she'll have a try if she meets Paul Mallinson."

"You mustn't be bitter, David," Miss Lancaster said reprovingly. "All women are not alike, you know. I think Clare looks a thoroughly nice girl. She says she was brought up in the country, so it's quite natural that she should want to get away from London. At least give her a chance to prove her ability."

"If she makes a hash of my notes tomorrow, I'll send her packing and do the damned job myself," he said.

Clare closed the window. Her contented mood had been completely shattered, and she felt a wave of cold dislike for a man who condemned her on so brief an acquaintance. She had a momentary impulse to go downstairs and tell him she was catching the first bus back to civilisation and he could type his book on two fingers for all she cared. Then she thought, No, hang the man, I'll stay here and show him that I may have red hair but I'm not a brainless, husband-hunting flibbertigibbet. Still fuming at the injustice of his criticism, she went along to the bathroom to clean her teeth.

When she returned to her room she found Hilda setting a beaker of hot chocolate on the bedside table.

"I thought this might help you to rest in a strange bed, miss," she said kindly. "Not that this bed isn't comfortable, mind, but there's some people as takes a night or two to settle to a mattress."

"That's very good of you," Clare said, touched by this thoughtfulness.

Hilda gave her a sharp look.

"You look quite peaked, miss. However, that's not to be wondered at, coming from London. How people can live in that smog I don't know." Her tone implied that London was perpetually enveloped in a pall of thick fog. "You're not on one of these nonsensical diets, are you?" she queried suspiciously.

"No, I've got an enormous appetite," Clare told her, smiling.

Hilda grunted doubtfully. "Well, I'll say good night. Breakfast is at eight, but Miss Jenny is always up at first light and she'll bring you a cup of tea around half-past seven. The bathroom will be clear because Mr. David has his shave at seven and Miss Lancaster has her breakfast in bed."

"Good night. Thank you again for the chocolate," Clare said.

As she climbed into bed and sipped the hot, creamy nightcap, she took a measure of comfort from the fact that Miss Lancaster and Hilda appeared to approve of her.



When Clare went down to breakfast the following morning, she found her employer screened by *The Times*. He acknowledged her presence with a curt "good morning", and as he retired behind the newspaper again Jenny, who was already attacking a bowl of cornflakes, put her finger to her lips as a warning signal that conversation was discouraged at the Creek House breakfast-table.

A large dish of bacon and eggs stood on a hotplate, and Clare made a good meal. As she was pouring herself a second cup of coffee, David Lancaster folded the paper and said, "You'll find the notes I mentioned on my desk, Miss Drake. There's some typing paper in the cabinet. I shall be in at lunch-time, so if you have any queries you can check them with me then."

"Can I come with you?" Jenny asked him eagerly.

"I suppose so, menace." He grinned at her indulgently.

Clare had already made her bed and tidied her room, so she went straight to the study. To find the typing paper she had to turn everything out of the cabinet, and she decided that it would be best to reorganise the study before starting to transcribe the neat, closely written notes Lancaster had left on the desk.

An hour later the room was almost unrecognisable. The desk top was clear except for an ash-tray and a blotter. The drawers of the cabinet slid smoothly shut, their contents neatly arranged. The bookshelves were dusted, the overflow ranged on the window-sill. Even the grate,

which had been littered with old pipe-cleaners and spent matches, was clear.

Hilda, coming in with a mug of cocoa and a newly baked buttered scone, looked round in astonishment.

"My word, what have you been up to, miss?" she exclaimed. "The place looks quite different . . . as neat as a new pin!"

"It's certainly a bit more workmanlike," Clare said with satisfaction.

"I don't know what Mr. David will say," Hilda observed. "He never allows me to clear up in here – except to sweep round the carpet once in a while. Why, he went proper wild when that Miss Bunberry threw away some papers he wanted."

"He may go as wild as he pleases with me," Clare said with a touch of asperity. "I can't work properly in a muddle, and that's that."

She was drinking the cocoa and making a list of necessary stationery when a shadow fell across her chair and a voice said, "Hallo. Who are you?"

She looked up, startled. A fair-haired man was smiling at her through the open window.

"I'm Mr. Lancaster's new secretary."

"Indeed!" The stranger's brows arched quizzically. "David certainly believes in variety. Is he around?" Gay brown eyes swept over her appraisingly.

"He's out on the marshes with Jenny. Can I give him a message?" Clare asked politely.

He shook his head. "It's not important. Do you suppose Hilda has some cocoa to spare?"

"Why yes, I expect so," she said uncertainly. Whoever he was, he was evidently on intimate terms with her employer. "Won't you come in?"

For answer he swung himself over the window-ledge, revealing that he wore well-cut jodhpurs.

"I'll go and ask Hilda," Clare said.

Hilda had a cup of cocoa to spare, and from Clare's description of the visitor she said that it was Mr. Mallinson from the Hall.

When Clare got back to the study, he was sitting on the desk, blowing smoke-rings.

"What's your name?" he asked. "Mine's Mallinson, Paul Mallinson."

"Clare Drake." So *this* was the man with two cars, a butler and a gold cigarette-case! He was certainly attractive in an insouciant, slightly raffish way. His hair fell across his forehead in a boyish lock, and he had a wide, mobile mouth.

"When did you arrive?" he asked.

"Yesterday." She tucked the stationery list in her pocket and inserted typing paper and carbons in the machine, preparatory to starting work.

"What on earth brings a girl like you to this dead-and-alive hole?"

"It seems rather an attractive village," said Clare.

"In other words, your reasons are none of my business," he said good humouredly. "When you've been here a week you'll realise that in places like Clint we have an insatiable curiosity. There's nothing to do but gossip."

"I'm afraid I shan't provide much grist for the mill," Clare said.

"I wouldn't be too sure." His eyes were admiring. "The very fact that you're young and glamorous should be enough to set the tongues wagging."

It was evident that Mr. Mallinson did not have to employ much subtlety to dazzle the local belles, Clare thought. She smiled charmingly at him and said firmly, "If you've finished your cocoa I have rather a lot of work to do. I'll tell Mr. Lancaster you called."

He looked a little startled by this polite dismissal, but he was not the type to be seriously discomposed, and with a cheery wave he departed via the window again.

When he had gone, Clare's fingers flew over the typewriter keys, and by half-past twelve five pages of notes had been neatly transcribed and clipped together. Satisfied with her morning's work, she went upstairs to tidy herself. As she came down, Miss Lancaster wandered into the hall with some letters.

"Ah, there you are, my dear. Hilda told me you were hard at work, so I didn't disturb you. I hear Paul called. What did you think of him?"

"He seemed very pleasant," Clare said non-committally.

Miss Lancaster shot her a shrewd glance.

"You sound a little doubtful."

"I'm not very good at judging people on first impressions," Clare said.

"Paul's trouble is that he has nothing to do," Miss Lancaster observed as they went into the sitting-room to await luncheon. "He has a great deal of money and leads a life of complete leisure. It isn't good for a man of that age to be idle. He needs a wife."

"I shouldn't have thought he would have had much difficulty in finding one if he is wealthy," Clare commented.

Miss Lancaster laughed. "Oh, the local matchmakers have been trying to catch him for years. He may be wild, but he isn't a fool; he won't be caught by anyone with an eye on his bank balance. Ah, that sounds like Jenny coming up the garden."

Jenny bounced indoors in great excitement at having found a lump of amber on the beach.

"Uncle David is going to have it polished for me," she announced, displaying her treasure.

"How did you get on with my notes?" Lancaster asked Clare over luncheon.

"I had no difficulty, thank you," she said coolly. "Perhaps you would like to check the typescript before I go

any farther?"

"Don't forget you promised to take me sailing this afternoon," Jenny reminded him anxiously.

"All right, baggage. We'll get started as soon as I've had a word with Miss Drake."

"Mr. Mallinson called this morning but left no message," Clare said.

"H'm, he hasn't lost much time," Lancaster said, and Clare intercepted a faint, disapproving head-shake directed at him by his aunt.

Although the significance of the remark was lost on her it was clear from that fleeting expression of reproof on Miss Lancaster's face that it had been in some way cutting. This confirmed Clare's impression that Lancaster was a disagreeable man. The very set of his head was arrogant, and there was something about his mouth that suggested he could be harsh, even cruel. Yet, she admitted reluctantly, when he smiled at Jenny his whole expression altered and one would take him for a kindly and humorous man.

While the others were finishing their sweet, Lancaster excused himself to go into the study.

A moment later there was an explosive curse from the hall, and in a tone of unmistakable wrath Clare was summoned to follow him.

CHAPTER II

"What the devil do you mean by rearranging this room?" Lancaster asked furiously as she appeared at the door.

"I assumed you would want me to tidy it, Mr. Lancaster," she said calmly.

"Oh, you did! Well, if you want to keep this job you'll have to stop assuming things," he said sharply. "May I ask where you've concealed the papers I left on the mantelshelf?"

"They're in the second drawer of the file."

"Very efficient!" he said sarcastically. "Now I suppose every time I want to find anything I shall have to ask you where it is."

"Surely that is the point of having a secretary, sir."

He glared at her. "It just so happens that I knew where everything was before you began your masterly clearance. And don't call me 'sir' in that smug fashion!"

"But *I* didn't know where everything was," she pointed out.

Their eyes met and antagonism flashed between them like an electric current. Remembering the disparaging remarks she had accidentally overheard from her bedroom window the night before, Clare's temper rose. It was fortunate that Miss Lancaster came into the room at that moment.

"Good heavens, the study looks quite habitable for a change," she said. "The Bunberry woman was shockingly lacking in method. She drove poor Hilda to distraction with her untidiness. I can see you are going to be a most useful addition to the household, my dear."

At this highly inopportune comment, Clare's sense of humour cooled her indignation.

"If the notes are satisfactory, Mr. Lancaster, I'll begin typing the rest," she said.

He glanced through the neat sheaf of papers which she handed to him.

"Yes, they appear to be correct," he said briefly.

"Why not bring your work into the garden?" Miss Lancaster suggested. "I shall be putting the finishing touches to my picture of Jenny, so I shan't distract you. David, will you carry the little table on to the lawn? It gets very hot in this room during the afternoon, and there's no reason why Clare should be cooped up here while the rest of us are enjoying the sun."

Without a word Lancaster picked up the table and took it through the hall. Whether he had any more to say on the subject of her tidying operations, Clare could not tell from his face, but at least, she thought, he would meet his match if he tried to bully her.

It was pleasant sitting in the dappled shade of the beech tree with Miss Lancaster working at her easel nearby – she was painting the background, so her model's absence did not hamper her – and Josh twitching in his sleep under the hedge. Clare's office in London had overlooked the busy Strand, and there had always been the roar of traffic and the acrid smell of exhaust fumes. Now, free of the city, she felt a pang of sympathy for the millions of people who were obliged to live amid the hustle of rush-hour crowds, grimy roof-top views and furnished flats in drab suburbs.

Her thoughts strayed to the stormy encounter with her employer. It was not merely a case of his distrusting her capabilities, she decided. He seemed to have some personal objection to her.

Clare knew without conceit that she was attractive. Both she and Hal had inherited their auburn hair and hazel-gold eyes from their mother, a strikingly beautiful Irishwoman who had sacrificed a brilliant career as a sin-

ger to marry Charles Drake, a struggling farmer. Although at the time their deaths had been a savage blow to their children, Clare recognised now that it was merciful that they had been killed together. Her parents had shared that rare harmony that sometimes illuminates a marriage, and would have been utterly lost without each other.

David Lancaster's underlying animosity did not pique her, for she had never, like many girls, accepted masculine admiration as her due. Sometimes she even felt a curious sense of guilt because her looks and her inner self were out of key.

Not long ago a man whom she liked but had never thought of loving had accused her of being a fraud.

"You're as cold as stone, Clare," he had said angrily. "Your face is like a flower, but I don't believe you have a heart at all."

Upset by the disruption of their friendship – she had not guessed that Stephen was falling in love with her – she had often worried about his bitter allegation. *Was* she cold – incapable of love? It was true that, at twenty-six, she had only once imagined herself a victim of that confusing emotion, and it had been a brief and unsatisfactory relationship. Some of the men she had known would have made excellent husbands, but they had never kindled anything more than liking and respect in her. Certainly she had never experienced the wild, tumultuous emotion, the singing of the heart, that poets wrote about.

Hal, who was constantly pursuing or pursued by the opposite sex, had teased her about it.

"You expect too much, old thing," he said affectionately. "Love isn't a world-shaking emotion. It's a game. You take it too seriously. Let yourself go for a change."

Clare shook her head. "I can't flirt outrageously, as you do. Besides, look at the muddles you get into – like the time you were practically engaged to two girls at once."

He grinned. "Yes, that was rather a tactical error. I wonder if they're still gnashing their teeth, poor creatures."

Remembering the conversation as she sat in the garden of Creek House, Clare smiled. Hal was an incorrigible breaker of hearts, but he had so much charm that even the girls whom he led so merrily up the garden path never succeeded in wholeheartedly detesting him.

At mid-afternoon Hilda brought out a tall jug of lemonade and a plate of cucumber sandwiches. Miss Lancaster put aside her palette. "I think we deserve ten minutes' rest. Come and tell me what you think of my picture."

"I don't know very much about art," Clare said apologetically.

"Gracious, this isn't art," the old lady said amusedly. "In my opinion, Art with a capital A is often sheer bunkum. I paint because I enjoy it."

"But it's very good . . . exactly like Jenny!" Clare said, studying the canvas.

"Yes, I think I've caught that impish expression. I do feel a portrait should be *like* the sitter. Nowadays so many of them are scarcely recognisable."

"Have you always painted?" Clare asked.

"No, I took it up during the war. It helped to keep life in proportion. Of course, as a young girl I used to draw still lifes and a few anaemic water-colours. It was considered a suitable accomplishment for young women in those days. Ah, how I should like to be young in these progressive times when women can do anything they please! Fifty years ago life was appallingly dull for us, you know. We sat about waiting for husbands – a most dismal occupation. Finally I couldn't stand it any longer, and I ran off to India as a mission worker. My family were horrified, quite convinced I had gone to the devil."

The old lady smiled reminiscently. "I never regretted it," she said softly. For a moment, as her thoughts lin-

gered in the past, a strange, almost youthful glow irradiated her lined face, and Clare wondered what memories had caused that swift look of great happiness.

"Now I must hurry down to the pillar-box," Miss Lancaster said briskly.

"Can I go for you?"

"Thank you, dear, but a little stroll will do me good. I'm in danger of becoming a fat old party. Come along, Josh, you lazy animal."

Clare laughed. Miss Lancaster's neat figure and sprightly walk were hard to reconcile with her age, and if, ten years hence, she was obliged to take to a wheelchair, it would probably be a stream-lined model with a dangerous turn of speed.

By half-past four Clare had finished the notes and went indoors to ask Hilda if she could have a bath before supper.

She was tucking her hair into a shower cap when Miss Lancaster tapped on the door. "Paul Mallinson has just asked us to dinner," she called. "He wants you to come too, dear. It isn't formal – any dress you have will do. Don't hurry yourself, we shan't be leaving until seven."

As she was dressing, Clare heard David Lancaster and Jenny return. She wondered if he would approve of her being included in the invitation to dine at the Hall. Perhaps she should have made her excuses.

"Gosh, you look wizard," Jenny said as she went downstairs. "Aunt Leo and Uncle David are changing, and I'm going with Hilda to visit her sister. Is that a new dress?"

"No, ages old," Clare said. She was careful with her clothes, and usually wore interchangeable skirts and jerseys or neat linen frocks. But this dress – a slim sheath of café-au-lait shantung with a wide cummerbund of topaz silk – had been a rare extravagance. It had the extreme simplicity and perfect cut of a model, the pale colour a foil for her hair. With it she wore a topaz bracelet and

matching ear-rings which had belonged to her mother.

"Did you have a good afternoon?"

"M'm, heavenly," Jenny said, her mouth full of banana. "Uncle David let me take the tiller nearly all the way."

"Have you any brothers or sisters, Jenny?"

"Not yet. Mummy's expecting a baby now. It should arrive in September, so she'll probably come home for Christmas or else I shall go to Bangkok to see it. Have you?"

"Yes, a twin brother. He's in Africa."

"Are you exactly alike?"

Clare nodded. "Except that my brother is taller and has a moustache."

At the sound of footsteps coming downstairs, she stopped short and finished her banana.

In a grey lounge suit and dark tie, David Lancaster still contrived to look like a man whose life was spent in the open air.

"I've finished the notes, Mr. Lancaster," she said.

"Right." He eyed her dress. "Have you a coat to put over that? Josh leaves hairs all over the car."

Surprised that he had even noticed her appearance, she went upstairs to fetch a wrap.

Shortly after seven, having seen Jenny and Hilda off to a neighbouring village, they started out for the Hall. The car was a dilapidated model which creaked and whined protestingly as they drove through the village.

Presently they swung through a tall stone gateway and chugged slowly up a drive bordered by giant rhododendrons ablaze with mauve and crimson blooms. The Hall was a large Georgian mansion, with an impressive stone portico under which a car almost as shabby as their own was parked.

"Ah, the Vicar and Penny are here," Miss Lancaster observed as her nephew helped her out. "Good evening,

Henderson. I'm afraid we're a little late."

"Good evening, madam." A manservant had come down the steps. Mr. Mallinson is in the library with Mr. Conyers and Miss Penelope."

Clare could understand why Jenny found the butler so impressive. He was a tall, immaculate personage of indeterminate age, with a manner that combined deference with dignity. He took their coats and ushered them into the library, where his master was talking to a grey-haired clergyman and a young girl.

"Hallo. I thought your old rattle-trap must have broken down again, David," Paul said. "Miss Drake, let me introduce Mr. Conyers, our padre, and this is Penelope Conyers. Miss Drake is David's new secretary," he explained to them.

The Reverend Michael Conyers had lived in Clint for thirty years. Larger and richer livings had never come his way, and materialists would have called him a failure. But he had not entered the Church with any worldly ambitions, and although his face was heavily lined and his suit frayed at the cuffs, his eyes reflected a contented spirit. Clare liked him immediately.

His daughter was a shy girl of nineteen or twenty. As they shook hands, an embarrassed flush suffused her face.

"Now, Miss Drake, what will you have to drink? Sherry?" Paul asked, smiling at Clare. Although he made no remark, his eyes expressed admiration for her dress.

Presently they went into the dining-room and Clare found herself sitting between her host and the Vicar. The food and wine were excellent, enhanced by fine old Crown Derby china, gleaming Waterford glass and spotless silver. Admiring the handsome loving-cup filled with white roses in the centre of the polished table, Clare guessed that there must be a large staff behind the scenes. When Jenny had said that Paul was rich, she had assumed he was a well-to-do country squire, but from what she

had seen this evening she realised he must be extremely wealthy to maintain this luxurious establishment in an era when the majority of landed families were crippled by death duties and the rising cost of keeping up their estates. No wonder the local matrons wanted him for a son-in-law!

"You're very quiet," he said.

"I was thinking what a beautiful home you have."

"A house," he corrected. "It won't be a home until I have a wife to share it with me."

"Are you holding the Harvest Ball again this year, Paul?" Miss Lancaster asked.

"Yes, I think so. I was wondering if it would be a good idea to have fancy dress for a change."

"The Harvest Ball is the highlight of our social life," Miss Lancaster told Clare. "Of course this house is the perfect setting for a gala dance. Yes, I think fancy dress would be rather amusing. I suppose we could hire costumes." She chuckled. "I rather fancy myself as the Witch of Endor, lurking in the maze."

"Oh, have you a maze?" Clare asked eagerly. "I remember getting lost in the one at Hampton Court when I was a child. I was completely panic-stricken until someone came round a corner and led me out."

"Quite a few people got lost in our maze at the last ball," Paul said with a wicked glint in his eyes.

After dinner they returned to the library, and Clare tried to talk to Penelope Conyers, although the girl was so acutely shy that it was difficult to draw her out. Had she known how to make the best of herself, she would have been quite pretty. Her hair was a pale ash-gold shade, and she had a delicate, almost transparent complexion, but without make-up her features seemed wan and insignificant. Her dress, too, was far too old for her, and had evidently been made by the village dressmaker.

Although Clare did her best to make friends with her,

it was a relief when Paul came over to them.

"Come, I'll show you the maze. The others are engrossed in a very dreary political argument," he said.

"Aren't you coming?" Clare asked when Penelope made no move to join them.

"Oh, Penny's seen it a dozen times," Paul said casually.

"Why is she so desperately shy?" Clare asked him as they strolled across the lawn.

"Who, Penny? I haven't noticed it. She's always busy running about the parish for her father. I suppose she'll marry a curate one of these days, and carry on the good work with him."

The maze lay beyond the sunken rose garden, and as Paul opened the wicket gate and they walked down the first alley he said, "I hope you aren't nervous."

She looked enquiringly at him.

"I haven't been in here for some time. I may have forgotten the way out," he explained, his eyes teasing. "You know, you look much less brisk and efficient tonight. I was quite in awe of you this morning, when you sat behind the typewriter looking so severe. How do you get on with David?"

"The work is very interesting," Clare said evasively.

"He's a good type, but too serious," Paul went on. "You must try to liven him up. He needs some feminine influence."

"I wasn't engaged to direct Mr. Lancaster's social activities," Clare said.

At that moment they emerged from the labyrinth of narrow pathways into the centre of the maze, where a wooden bench stood beside a shallow goldfish pool. The warm golden light of the evening sun glinted on the surface of the water and the brilliant shapes skimming gracefully beneath.

"I'm still puzzled why a girl like you should come to

work here," Paul said as they sat down. "You aren't running away from an unhappy love affair, are you?"

Clare laughed and shook her head. "If you must know, Mr. Mallinson, I wanted to live in the country for a while. It's as simple as that."

"Seems very odd to me," he said. "You'll be bored to death in a week or two."

"I don't think so. I can swim and go for walks."

"Then you'd better have me as your escort," he advised. "You never know what unsavoury characters you might meet in this forsaken spot."

"You sound just like my Aunt Constance," Clare said. "She was always giving me Awful Warnings about the dangers of country rambles. We'd better go back. The sun is almost down."

"Are you feeling chilly? Here, have my jacket."

Before she could demur, he had stripped off his jacket and draped it round her shoulders.

"Look, you'll be free on Sunday, won't you?" he asked. "David can't keep you at the treadmill seven days a week. Why not come sailing with me? I'll get my housekeeper to fix up a picnic lunch."

"I really don't know whether —"

Paul cut her protests short. "I'll ring you up on Saturday night in case the weather looks tricky," he said firmly. "Bring a swimsuit with you. There are some bad currents along this coast, and if I show you the best spot to bathe you won't get into difficulties later."

As they left the maze Clare saw that the others were standing on the terrace. She thought she saw a quizzical glint in Miss Lancaster's eyes as they came up the steps, and wished she was not wearing Paul's jacket.

Soon after ten they left.

"Don't forget our date on Sunday," Paul reminded her as he saw them to the car.

*

The following morning the sky was overcast and Lancaster began work on the first section of his book. He dictated slowly and with great concentration, seldom correcting himself. From time to time he asked her to read back a passage while he sat staring thoughtfully out of the window.

At mid-morning Hilda brought in a jug of cocoa and Lancaster filled his pipe.

"You may smoke if you wish," he said as Clare passed him a cup.

"No, thank you." She flipped back the pages of her shorthand pad, checking through the notes as she drank her cocoa.

"Do you find this very boring?" he asked.

"Not at all," she said politely.

"I don't suppose you are particularly interested in plant life."

"I've never studied it before – at least, not coast plants. I know most of the ordinary wild flowers." Her face softened at the memory of the big dog-eared scrapbook in which she and Hal had pasted and labelled grasses and flowers which they found in the hedgerows. How happy they had been scrambling about the countryside, with their mongrel pup, Dickens, panting along behind.

She sighed and became aware that Lancaster was staring at her, and hastily put her cup back on the tray and prepared to continue work.

By lunch-time the sky had cleared and he said he would be out for the afternoon.

"It shouldn't take more than an hour to transcribe these notes. Have you anything else you wish me to do?" Clare asked.

"No, there's nothing else. By the way, we generally drive over to Norwich on Saturdays if you want to do any shopping. Naturally your Sundays are free."

She thanked him and was at the door when he called

her back.

"Miss Drake, I believe I was unnecessarily abrupt yesterday – about your having cleared up this room. In point of fact, it seems to have been an improvement. Nevertheless, I should have preferred to be consulted beforehand."

"Yes, Mr. Lancaster."

Clare paused a moment to see if he had anything further to say, and then went upstairs. Presumably that terse statement had been his idea of an apology, she thought with some amusement.

After an early breakfast on Saturday morning they drove inland to Norwich. Clare and Jenny sat in the back of the car with Josh between them, a scarlet collar round his neck and his tongue hanging out expectantly as he gazed over Lancaster's shoulder.

Clare had submitted a list of necessary stationery to her employer, and he had given her a blank cheque to cover the cost. There were also a number of personal purchases she wished to make.

"Now, before we start shopping let's have a cup of coffee," Miss Lancaster suggested as David parked the car near the Cathedral. "If you have no special plans you can help me choose a hat for the Vicarage fête next week, my dear," she added to Clare. "I suppose you want to go with David, Jenny?"

"Yes, please. Are you going to the gun-shop today, Uncle David?"

Lancaster nodded. "We'll meet you for lunch at one," he said.

The streets were crowded with country people, yet there was an intimate atmosphere in the busy shopping centre that was quite different from the hustling imper-

sonal throngs in Oxford Street or Piccadilly. Listening to the slow Norfolk voices as they waited to be served in the stationer's, Clare felt none of the loneliness, the curious sense of isolation that she had often experienced in London. She arranged to collect her parcel later in the day, and accompanied Miss Lancaster to the millinery department of a large store to select a hat.

"You will need one, too, dear, unless you brought some hats with you," the old lady said. "The fête is the village equivalent of Ascot, and we all take great pains to look smart. I remember last year Mrs. Bagshott had a wonderful hat – three purple birds on a nest of green tulle. She told me in confidence that it had belonged to her mother, but really it looked quite as good as anything the shops have nowadays."

Shopping with Miss Lancaster was an illuminating experience. She had no time for fulsome compliments from the assistants, and told them frankly that she preferred to be left to her own devices.

"They harry one so, dear," she confided to Clare. "I know what I want, and I refuse to be distracted by some child in her teens who thinks I'm much too ancient to wear a hat at all unless it's a black poke-bonnet. Now that would suit you . . . oh dear, five guineas. A trifle expensive, even for the fête!"

Eventually Miss Lancaster chose a dignified toque of massed violets which looked most becoming on her soft white hair, while Clare bought a shady cream straw with a garland of mimosa round the crown.

"Good gracious! It's almost one o'clock. How time flies when one is enjoying oneself," Miss Lancaster exclaimed.

"I think I'll have a snack lunch," Clare said, not wishing to intrude on them more than was necessary.

"Nonsense. You'll have lunch with us. You need a proper meal after such an exhausting morning," Miss Lan-

caster said decisively.

They arrived at the restaurant to find Jenny deep in consultation with a waiter.

"Uncle David is in the cloakroom," she announced. "Aunt Leo, do you think I could have a Knickerbocker Glory for my sweet? It's two shillings but very good value, and I could pay half out of my pocket money."

"I dare say our finances will stand it," her aunt said. "Ah, there you are, David. We've both been very extravagant and bought two delightful hats for the fête."

"What are your plans for this afternoon?" he asked, manœuvring his long legs under the table.

"I have an appointment with my hairdresser, and then I must change my library book," Miss Lancaster said, consulting her pocket diary. "What about you?"

"Jenny wants to go on the Castle battlements."

"Perhaps Clare would like to join you. The Castle is well worth a visit."

"Do come, Clare," Jenny coaxed. "We're going down into the dungeons, where they tortured the prisoners," she added with macabre relish.

"If Mr. Lancaster doesn't mind," Clare said diffidently.

"Come by all means," he replied.

The Castle stood on a grassy mound in the centre of the city, its stout walls mellowed by centuries of wind and rain and long hot summers. Anxious not to miss the conducted tour of the dungeons, Jenny hustled them through the museum to where a party of American tourists stood waiting for an attendant to lead them into the Castle's depths.

The dungeons were cold and dank, and various rusty shackles and instruments of torture were on view, sinister relics of the Castle's cruel history. Clare was glad when they returned to daylight, and followed the guide up a narrow circular staircase to the battlements.

"Don't look over the edge unless you have a good head

for heights," Lancaster warned her.

"I'd rather be up here than in the cells," she said, gazing down at the weaving traffic in the street below. "I think I must have claustrophobia. I'd hate to be locked up underground."

"Yes, the prisoners must have had a pretty grim time of it in the old days," he agreed. "It isn't so long since they held the last public execution up here."

"How appallingly harsh life was until this century," Clare said. "When you think how many poor wretches were deported just for petty thefts."

As they were going down the winding staircase, Clare slipped on a worn step and instinctively grabbed at Lancaster's shoulder to save herself from falling.

"Your heels are too high for this sort of thing," he said, steadying her.

"I'm so sorry. I might have overbalanced both of us."

"Have you hurt your ankle?"

She shook her head. His fingers were warm and strong on her bare arm, and the confined space emphasised his height and breadth of shoulder. It occurred to her that, had he wished, he could have barred her way simply by standing still, and, absurdly, this realisation gave her an odd thrill of excitement.

Heavens, what a primitive reaction, she thought.

As they continued down the stairs she reflected that as women became more and more emancipated, men had less need to be stalwart and protective. In consequence, a subtle element in their relationship was in danger of being lost. Perhaps it was Lancaster's almost aggressive masculinity that sparked her antagonism.

Leaving the Castle, they strolled through the cattle market until Lancaster said it was time to meet his aunt for tea. Josh, having been shut in the car since lunch-time, was in a boisterous mood and disgraced himself in the tea-shop by seizing a Pekinese belonging to a stout mat-

ron and shaking it vigorously as if it were a bundle of fluff.

Order was restored by Lancaster, who exerted a surprising degree of gallantry to soothe the Peke's indignant owner, while Josh retired beneath the table with his ears back and wearing an expression of abject penitence.

"It's not funny," Lancaster said sternly as Jenny stifled her giggles behind the menu. But as soon as the ruffled lapdog had been led away, he grinned and allowed Josh to emerge from disgrace.

"Mr. Mallinson telephoned twice. He was asking for you, Miss Drake," Hilda said as, home again, they sat down to the supper she had waiting for them. "I told him you'd gone up to the city, and he said he would ring back at nine o'clock."

"Thank you, Hilda." Clare had forgotten that Paul had arranged to telephone her about the picnic. She noticed that Lancaster was frowning, and remembered what he had said to his aunt on her first night at Creek House.

"She can hardly expect to catch a husband in a place like Clint, although I dare say she'll have a try if she meets Paul."

If he likes to think I'm gold-digging, let him, she thought crossly.

At nine the telephone rang.

"I expect that's Paul for you, dear," Miss Lancaster said.

Without looking at her employer, Clare went into the hall and picked up the receiver.

CHAPTER III

"THIS isn't a picnic – it's a banquet!" said Clare, watching Paul unpack the contents of the hamper.

They were sitting in the shelter of a sand-dune under a cloudless blue sky, with nothing but the murmur of the breeze in the marram grass and the mournful cry of a solitary gull to disturb them.

"There you are, madame, a cup of soup to warm you after your swim," he said, handing her a beaker of fragrant broth.

"M'm, delicious! Do you do everything in this opulent fashion?"

"I believe in making the most of life. Who knows, tomorrow the sea may break through the dyke and we shall all be swept away."

Clare removed an inquisitive orange-striped caterpillar which was climbing up her ankle. "That's an unusual philosophy for a countryman, isn't it?"

"But I'm not a countryman except by birth. When winter comes you won't catch me plodding through the storm. I have a very cosy flat in Town, where I hibernate until this part of the world is habitable again."

"Oh, in a way the winter is the best time," she protested. "Think of the frosty hedges and blazing fires and skating. None of the horrid grey slush and wet mackintosh smell that you get in London."

"Think of the icy draughts and the long boring evenings," he parried. "You know, you look like a mermaid in that green bathing-suit with your hair loose. You should always wear it down. It looks far too prim done up in that schoolmarm bun."

"I'm not a lady of leisure," Clare reminded him. "Who

would employ me with my hair all over the place?"

"Anyone with eyes in their head. David's a lucky fellow. I must get his brother to find me a secretary – unless you get tired of classifying seaweed and come to work for me."

Clare helped herself to a chicken and ham patty. "The 'seaweed', as you call it, is extremely interesting," she said.

Paul looked sceptical. "You should be a mannequin, not a secretary," he said.

"Nothing I should dislike more," Clare said decisively. "A girl I know took up modelling, and after six months she had dropped arches and nervous indigestion, poor thing. It may look a glamorous job, but you have to stand for hours under broiling hot lights with the photographer snapping your head off if you blink. Not for me, thank you."

"What about marriage?" he asked. "Or doesn't that appeal either?"

Clare laughed. "You say that as if I ought to make up my mind before it's too late."

"Not at all. I was wondering how you had managed to evade the happy state so far."

"Well, they tell me it's a good plan to fall in love first. Can I have another of those superb patties, please?"

"Sorry, I'm a very lazy host. Help yourself. So you haven't been in love yet?"

"Not enough for marriage."

"What was the snag?"

"How inquisitive you are!"

"Naturally. When a beautiful girl says she has never been in love it has deep psychological implications. I'm intrigued. Have some coffee and tell me all about it."

He shifted his position to pass her the cup, and remained beside her, propped on one elbow, the sea-wind ruffling his fair hair.

“Now, tell me all.”

She smiled. “There’s nothing to tell. It’s far more remarkable that you should be unmarried. Are you a confirmed bachelor?”

Paul shrugged. “Far from it. I should like a wife to warm my slippers and listen to my troubles. Unfortunately I can’t find a girl to take me on.”

For an instant his face was serious, and Clare fancied she saw a shadow of sadness in his brown eyes.

“Either they want to reform me – make me work for my living, you know – or else they have their eyes on my bank balance,” he added.

“Aren’t you being cynical?” she suggested.

“Merely realistic. There are two kinds of women. The beautiful ones and the good ones. I suppose one of these days I shall have to decide which is the lesser evil – a plain face or a greedy nature.”

Clare watched a steamer moving slowly along the horizon. The tide was going out, leaving shallow pools along the undulating beach. Farther along the coast there would be crowds and pleasure boats and ice-cream stalls, but here, except for themselves, the shore was tenantless and very peaceful.

“Supposing you found a girl who was beautiful *and* good?” she said.

“Then she would undoubtedly be married already or immune to my blandishments.”

“I should think you would be wise to choose the plain face,” she said thoughtfully. “After all, beauty isn’t a lasting asset, and when you like people you hardly notice their faces. Surely it’s a person’s mind that is important.”

Paul looked amused. “Maybe, but marriage is not an intellectual relationship. I wonder why women delude themselves that men are interested in their brains. There never was a woman yet who could reason logically. They reduce everything to emotional terms. If a man wants

serious conversation he goes to his club or the local."

If he had hoped to rouse her to an indignant denial of this charge, he was disappointed.

Clare said calmly, "But aren't you confusing minds with intellects? Clever people aren't necessarily kind or tolerant or humorous. Surely those qualities are far more important than physical beauty or tremendous intelligence?" Then she laughed, brushing away a strand of hair which had blown across her face. "What a solemn discussion for a hot afternoon! I suppose it's too soon after lunch to swim again?"

"Much too soon," Paul said lazily.

"Let's look for amber, then. Jenny found quite a large piece on the shore the other day." She sprang up, brushing the sand from her swimsuit.

"If I'd known you were the energetic type I wouldn't have asked you," Paul complained as he followed her on to the beach.

"Degenerate creature! I thought you were going to teach me to sail?"

"There isn't enough wind. Here, don't go so fast."

He reached out and caught her hand in a light clasp.

For a second Clare wondered if it would be wise to draw away. She liked him and was enjoying the picnic, but she was not prepared to embark on even the mildest flirtation at this stage.

"Don't worry. I'm not making advances!"

She flushed. Did her face reflect her thoughts so clearly?

"Would you mind if I did?" he asked.

"I should be disappointed in you," she said evenly.

"That's an odd reaction. Why disappointed?"

"Because I don't much like casual philandering."

"That's a nice Victorian name for it. Do you suspect me of being a philanderer, then?"

She laughed. "Yes, a bit."

"But you aren't a philandering girl?"

Clare shook her head and bent to search a patch of shingle.

He let go of her hand and lit a cigarette.

"You know, you and David are rather alike."

She looked up, startled. "Good heavens. In what possible way?"

"You're both sober-minded types. Puritans. Life is real, life is earnest."

"So it is," Clare objected.

"All the more reason to get as much fun as you can while you can," he pointed out. "And philandering is part of the fun." His eyes were teasing.

She fingered a pebble worn smooth and perfectly oval by the shuttle of the tide.

"But doesn't it get stale?" she asked. "Playing at love, I mean. Making a game of something which should be important."

"If you take it seriously you can get hurt," he said dryly.

"Yes . . . but even if you do, it's worth while. It has taught you more about life."

It occurred to her that she had never discussed love with a man before – except Hal. In some ways Paul reminded her of her brother. Perhaps that was why, on such a brief acquaintance, she felt at ease with him. He had no reticence, no moodiness, none of the almost hostile reserve which seemed to characterise David Lancaster.

"I wonder why Miss Lancaster is unmarried?" she said inconsequently. "She's such a delightful old lady, and she must have been very handsome when she was a girl."

Paul tossed away his cigarette. "It's rather a sad story. She worked in a mission hospital in India before the war. Apparently she fell in love with a doctor – an Indian."

"Yes, she told me about being in India the other day. I suppose they couldn't marry because of racial prejudices."

"I don't think cold shoulders would have worried her," Paul said. "But the chap was married. I gather he was a highly cultured man – took a degree at Cambridge and so forth. But he was married very young, one of those family alliances that are arranged in infancy. Of course in those days Indian women were still kept right in the background, so he probably had little in common with his wife. She showed me a photograph of him once. A very handsome fellow with extraordinarily penetrating dark eyes."

"How dreadful for her," Clare said softly. "But that illustrates my point. She isn't at all embittered by having loved someone she could never marry. I remember now when she was talking about India her face had a kind of glow – as if something wonderful had happened to her there."

They walked for a while without speaking, the girl thinking with compassion of the hopeless love between the young Leonora Lancaster and the Indian doctor, and the man watching her face.

Paul Mallinson was an avowed cynic. Experience had taught him that women were sly, avaricious, jealous creatures to be treated warily. He sometimes likened them to the ferrets he had kept as a boy. You had only to let your attention wander for a moment and their needle-sharp teeth would bite the hand that fondled them.

There were, he admitted, women who were sweet and gentle, but they were invariably as plain as puddings. Yet, watching Clare's pale oval face and wistful golden eyes, he wondered if here was a girl who was both lovely and honest.

He had recently extricated himself from a stormy affair with an ambitious young woman who, in a flare of unguarded temper, had admitted that she cared nothing for him as a man but was prepared to put up with him because he was rich. After Marcella's provocative brand of

charm – subtlety had not been her strong point – he found Clare's aparent lack of wiles very refreshing.

"I'm going to fetch my bathing-cap and have another swim," she said. She began to run, her hair tossing on her slim shoulders.

"I'll race you," Paul called.

He caught up with her as they reached the dunes, and they scrambled up the yielding sand to arrive laughing and breathless beside the picnic things.

She was like a child, he thought, her eyes alight with excitement, her cheeks flushed. Yet her mouth, the lovely curve from throat to shoulder and her long slim legs were not childish. His pulse quickened, but before he could touch her she had jumped to her feet and begun hunting in her beach-bag for the white bathing-cap.

"Last year I went to Cornwall for my holiday. The weather was terrible. I haven't basked in the sun like this for ages," she said.

"Don't get burnt," he warned.

"I never burn." She fastened the strap under her chin. "Another week of this sun and I shall be like a gypsy. Aren't you coming?"

A belt of fine shingle led down to the water's edge and Clare trod gingerly, biting her lip at the sharpness of the tiny pebbles.

"This is agony! I must buy some bathing shoes."

For answer Paul picked her up and carried her the rest of the way. In spite of his slim build and indolent manner he was surprisingly strong.

"I'm much too heavy for such chivalry," she protested.

He set her down, knee-deep in swirling foam, his arm lingering round her waist. Their eyes met and held.

"Clare...."

She shook her head. "No, Paul. Don't spoil it."

"A very flattering reaction!" His smile was wry.

She touched his arm shyly. "I like you very much.

Don't let's complicate things."

He watched her wade deeper into the flowing green water and disappear in a neat duck-dive. Presently she surfaced, laughing, shaking the water from her eyes.

"Come on. It's as hot as —" A breaker caught her un-awares.

Grinning, he dived.

*

The wind had risen and the sky was flecked with rosy wisps of cloud as they sailed back along the creek.

"Watch your head!" Paul cried as they changed tack and the boom swung over.

Clare had never sailed in a dinghy before, and she found it a wonderfully stimulating experience. The slap of the incoming tide against the bows, the creak of the sail, the smooth motion of the boat, all combined to give her a feeling of freedom and exhilaration. She was sorry when Paul steered the little craft into the sandy channel between the salt-smelling marsh beds and they arrived at their mooring place.

"How about dining with me? It seems a pity to end the day so early," he said as they walked past the boatyard to where his low-slung cream sports car was parked.

"Thank you, but I must go back now. I promised to model for Miss Lancaster this evening."

"Well, what about coming for a proper sailing lesson tomorrow night?"

"I don't know when I shall be free. Mr. Lancaster may want me to work."

"You're not playing hard to get, are you?" he suggested.

"No, of course not," Clare said indignantly. "It's just that my working hours are erratic and I can't make definite arrangements during the week."

He nodded. "I'll ring you up, then. Thank you for today."

Clare watched him drive off in a flurry of dust, and then walked along the towpath to Creek House, humming softly to herself.

He was nice. Under that veneer of worldly cynicism lay the real Paul Mallinson, and she suspected that he was not nearly so casual and disillusioned as he liked to appear. Oh, no doubt he was a rake, but somehow she felt sure that he was not altogether an idle playboy leading a profitless existence in pursuit of pleasure. Or am I letting myself be deceived by his charm? she wondered. Of course his attentive manner and the silent flattery of his brown eyes meant nothing, but a smooth technique could be dangerously insidious.

The towpath led to a gate in the hedge of Creek House garden, and Clare found the rest of the household sitting on the lawn. David Lancaster was reading while his aunt dozed and Jenny sat on the grass brushing Josh.

"Hallo. Did you have fun?" Jenny asked, giving Josh a slap with the brush as he took a playful bite at one of her toes. "Were there chicken patties? Paul usually has super food for picnics."

"Yes, chicken galore *and* fruit cake *and* hothouse peaches," Clare admitted, laughing at the child's envious expression.

"You look nicer with your hair like that, doesn't she, Uncle David?" Jenny said.

Lancaster glanced up from his book, his eyes sweeping over Clare's apricot sweater and brief denim shorts. She was uncomfortably aware that with her hair tousled by the sail home and her bare legs she must present an unbusiness-like appearance.

"I must tidy up," she said hurriedly, sparing him the necessity of commenting on her appearance.

During the following week the village was in a furore of preparations for the Vicarage fête to be held on Saturday afternoon.

When she was not busy with her employer's notes, Clare helped Miss Lancaster to collect and sort out contributions to the white elephant of which the old lady was in charge. On Friday evening they went over to the Vicarage to decorate the stalls. The weather was still hot and the B.B.C. had forecast a heat-wave, so there was little fear that these would have to be transferred to the village hall.

While Lancaster tacked a fascia of scarlet crêpe paper to the front of their stall, Clare and Jenny fixed up a large painted notice announcing the bargains to be had. Miss Lancaster, a member of the organising committee, was closeted in the Vicar's study discussing final arrangements.

Presently Hilda arrived with a box of home-made preserves and bottled fruits for the produce section. Clare laughed aloud at the recollection of a remark Hilda had made that morning.

"What's the joke?" Lancaster asked.

"Hilda doesn't approve of having a film-star to open the fête," Clare explained. "She told me this morning that it would have been better to get a nice M.P. or a lady of title."

Lancaster laughed.

"Who is this girl, anyway? I've never heard of her."

"Andrea Ashley? She's quite well known. She usually plays bad-girl parts."

Presently Lancaster put down the hammer and said, "I'm going across to the Trafalgar for a glass of beer. I won't be long." Then, as an afterthought: "Would you care for a drink?"

"Why, yes, I would. This is hot work."

They crossed the green to the village inn. The parlour

was empty, most of the local men preferring the bar.

"What will you have?" Lancaster asked as the landlord put his head through the service hatch. "Shandy? Cider?"

"Cider, please."

"A cider and a brown ale, George."

They sat down on a leather couch and Lancaster lit his pipe. Clare wondered if he was annoyed by her acceptance of his invitation. Had he come alone he would probably be in the bar, chatting to the farm workers, perhaps joining a game of darts.

The cider was refreshingly sharp. She remembered a West Country saying she had learnt from her father's foreman, a gnarled old man with a Somerset accent so broad that visitors could never understand a word he said.

"Beer on cider makes a good rider, cider on beer makes a man queer," she murmured half aloud.

"Where did you learn that?" Lancaster asked.

"From an old man who used to work for my father. I'm afraid he wouldn't have approved of this." She indicated her glass. "The cider in our part of the world comes out of casks and is very much stronger."

"So I've heard. How did you come to leave the West Country? I gather you don't like London."

She told him briefly of her parents' death and how she and Hal had gone to live with an elderly relative in a sedate Kensington square.

"That must have been pretty rough for you."

"It was worse for my brother. I suppose girls are more adaptable. Hal loathed it. I think it was partly reaction to those years with Aunt Constance that made him go out to Africa. He had a craving for space."

"Yes, I can understand that," Lancaster said. "I remember when I was at boarding school I used to feel hemmed in. If you're brought up near the sea, it gets into your blood."

"Have you always lived here, Mr. Lancaster?"

He shook his head. "I was born in British Columbia. My father was a geologist, and he was on a survey expedition in the Rockies at the time. Normally my mother went with him unless it was particularly tough territory, when she stayed in a village somewhere near the site. That trip seemed to have a jinx on it. My father was killed in a rock fall, and my mother died when I was born."

"Oh . . . how terrible!"

Lancaster prodded the bowl of his pipe. "I was sent home to live with an uncle, and when the old chap died he left me Creek House. After I came down from University I settle down here."

"And your brother? Did he live here, too?"

"No, he was already at prep school when my parents died. He was brought up by some of my mother's relatives."

"You're not at all alike," Clare said.

Lancaster grinned. "James would thank you for that observation. He's very much the prosperous city man. Well, I suppose we ought to get back to work."

Clare realised suddenly that for twenty minutes they had been talking with perfect amity. Lancaster seemed to have forgotten his usual formality, and now, knowing something of his background, she was inclined to revise her original estimate of him as a proud, arrogant man contemptuous of people less self-sufficient than himself. Probably his childhood accounted for his aloof manner. He might even be shy.

*

She spent the following morning helping Miss Lancaster to arrange the wares on the stall. At midday everyone hurried home for an early lunch, as the fête was to be opened at two o'clock.

A little while earlier it had been discovered that nobody had collected a baby pig – the first prize in one of the competitions – from an outlying farm, and Lancaster volunteered to fetch it. He returned as the rest of the household were finishing lunch, and Jenny immediately rushed outside to see the piglet, which was squealing protestingly in a wooden crate.

“We must leave here by half-past one,” Miss Lancaster warned them. “Now, where did I put the raffle tickets? I’m sure we shall be late.” She hurried upstairs, muttering distractedly.

Lancaster exchanged an amused glance with Clare. “There’s more upheaval on the day of the fête than all the rest of the year,” he said dryly. “Aunt Leo will be completely exhausted by this evening if she doesn’t calm down.”

“Yes, but she’s thoroughly enjoying it all. She and Hilda were in a terrible panic just before you came in. They thought Josh had sneaked off with the cold roast chicken for the platform party’s sandwiches.”

“And had he?”

“No. Hilda had put it on top of the kitchen dresser for safe keeping and forgotten it was there. I must change or I shan’t be ready in time.”

On Miss Lancaster’s advice Clare had decided to wear a dress of apple green pleated silk. At first she had thought it would be too formal for a country bazaar, but the old lady had assured her that everyone dressed in their best for the fête, and to wear an ordinary summer frock would be an affront to the importance of the occasion.

“Clare, would you do up my frock, please?” Jenny asked, popping her head round the door.

“Oh, aren’t you going to let your hair down?” she asked as Clare dealt with the row of press-studs. “Do, it looks so pretty.”

When the child had dashed away, Clare paused uncer-

tainly before the looking-glass. Then, with an impulsive movement, she pulled the combs from her chignon and let her hair fall round her face in a soft red-gold cloud. It was certainly more in keeping with the shady picture hat she had bought in Norwich last Saturday. But was twenty-six too old for loose curls?

A glance at her watch showed her she had only a few minutes in which to decide. Well, why not? Nobody would be looking at her with Andrea Ashley on the platform.

Securing the hat with a long pearl-headed pin borrowed from Miss Lancaster, she snatched up her handbag and ran downstairs, her skirts rustling against the banisters.

"Gosh, you look just like a film-star yourself," Jenny said admiringly from the kitchen doorway.

"I've brought the car round. . . ."

Lancaster, coming in from the garden, stopped short. His blue eyes travelled from her slim ankles up to the broad-brimmed hat shading her smiling face.

And Clare, meeting his glance, felt her heart miss a beat, and an unfamiliar tingling sensation shivered down her spine.

CHAPTER IV

"... and now, ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce the popular young film actress who has come all the way from London to open our fête – Miss Andrea Ashley!"

As the Vicar sat down there was a vigorous burst of clapping, punctuated by wolf whistles from the local youths.

Andrea Ashley waited until the applause had subsided. Standing in the centre of the fern-banked dais, her slim white hands loosely clasped, she looked incredibly beautiful. The women in the audience gazed enviously at her dress of pale yellow pleated chiffon and the hat of yellow rose petals set on her lustrous black hair. It was impossible to imagine her bending over a stove, the famous magnolia complexion flushed, the immaculate coiffure dishevelled.

Her speech was brief, and when it was over a small boy was pushed forward by his proud mother to present a bouquet of carnations. With a radiant smile the film-star broke off a flower and tucked it in his buttonhole. There was a second outbreak of applause as a photographer from the county newspaper took a picture of this charming gesture, and then the platform party moved off on a tour of the stalls and the crowd dispersed.

For the next two hours Clare and Jenny were busy at the white elephant stall. Trade was brisk, the most unlikely pieces of bric-à-brac finding eager purchasers, and it was a relief when Miss Lancaster appeared and told them to run along and enjoy themselves while she took over.

Jenny raced off to get Andrea Ashley's signature in her autograph book, and Clare was strolling across the lawn to the refreshment tent for a cup of tea when Penelope Conyers intercepted her.

"Would you like to wash?" the girl asked. "I expect your hands are sticky after serving all this time."

"Yes, I should. I hadn't realised it would be such hard work," Clare said, following her into the Vicarage.

"Isn't Miss Ashley lovely?" Penny remarked as they went upstairs.

"M'm, terribly glamorous. I haven't seen her since the opening. What is she doing now?"

"Having tea with Paul."

Clare smiled. Trust Paul to be in attendance! When she had washed her hands in the bathroom, Penny invited her into her bedroom to do her hair.

"I must get back to work," she said. "Can you find your way out?"

"Of course. Thank you for giving me a chance to tidy up," Clare said gratefully.

Penny hesitated as if she were about to say something, then changed her mind and hurried away.

As she combed her hair, Clare glanced round the room. She noticed that, apart from a faded water-colour landscape above the bed and a blue silk pin-cushion on the chest-of-drawers, it was bare of any decorations or personal possessions. The narrow iron bedstead with its white honeycomb counterpane and the wooden chair beside it reminded her of a hospital ward, and she wondered why Penny had none of the oddments that most young girls treasure.

There were no cosmetics on the dressing-table, no books on the window-sill, not even a pair of slippers left beneath the fringe of the counterpane.

Remembering the girl's acute shyness at their first meeting and her dowdy clothes, Clare felt sure that there was something wrong with her way of life. Paul had said that she was always busy helping her father in the parish, but it was not natural for anyone of her age to exclude all other interests and have a room so lacking in identity.

I must ask Miss Lancaster about her, Clare thought as she went downstairs.

Crossing the lawn again, she was accosted by a massive woman in purple.

"Ah, Miss Drake, are you going to guess how many beans I have in this jar? The prize for the nearest guess is a bottle of sherry, so I'm sure you will want to try your luck."

"Yes, of course. How much is it?"

"Sixpence, if you please. And how are you liking your work with our distinguished botanist?" the Purple Lady enquired archly.

"Oh . . . very much, thank you." Clare wondered who on earth she could be.

"Such a charming man and quite brilliant in his field, of course. I do so admire a man of intellect. Unfortunately *some* members of our little community –" The Purple Lady spied a prospective customer and hurried away, her sentence unfinished.

What an extraordinary woman, Clare thought, watching her bear down on a grizzled farmer who looked as if neither he nor the members of his family could have any conceivable use for sherry.

So she thought David Lancaster a charming man, did she? Charm was the last quality Clare would have ascribed to her employer. Paul had charm to a dangerous degree, but to apply that particular adjective, with its implication of easy friendliness and winning ways, to Lancaster was as incongruous as calling a fierce Alsatian a "cute doggie". And yet, lacking charm, Lancaster had something compelling about him that, in its way, was as hard to resist as Paul's smooth approach.

Realising suddenly that she was still standing where the Purple Lady had left her, Clare cut short her train of thought and made for the tea tent. Lancaster's disposition was not her concern. But as she bought a cup of strong

sweet tea from the publican's wife, who was presiding over the big copper urn, the thing that had lain just below the surface of her conscious thoughts all afternoon suddenly refused to be ignored any longer.

With a clarity which the passage of three hours had in no way lessened, she saw herself standing in the hall at Creek House, looking into David Lancaster's eyes, her heart fluttering like a startled bird.

Now, just thinking about it, her hand trembled so violently that her tea was in danger of spilling.

I must be losing my mind, she thought wildly. It doesn't make sense. I don't even *like* the man.

And yet the undeniable fact was that there in the hall for the space of a few seconds she had experienced a flare of emotion never felt before. Without realising that she had not drunk the tea, she put the cup back on the trestle table and thrust her way through the crowd to the door of the tent.

"Aren't you coming to see the Knobbly Knees Competition?" Jenny tugged at her sleeve.

Clare stared at her blankly.

"Oh . . . yes, if you like," she said vaguely.

"I wanted Uncle David to try," Jenny said. "I'm sure he would win, but he won't enter. The prize is a bottle of whisky."

To the little girl's disgust the whisky was won by a dairyman whose knees were "not a patch on Uncle David's".

"Did you get Miss Ashley's signature?" Clare asked.

Jenny nodded. "She was talking to Paul. He said she ought to make a film about Helen of Troy. Who was she, Clare?"

Clare smiled. "A beautiful Greek queen."

Jenny digested this information thoughtfully for a moment.

"Then Paul must have meant that Miss Ashley was beautiful," she remarked.

"A remarkable deduction, my dear Holmes," David Lancaster said from behind them.

Jenny grinned. "Elementary, my dear Watson," she said grandly.

He turned to Clare. "Have you had any tea?"

"Yes, thank you."

"There's an ice-cream man by the gate," Jenny suggested hopefully.

"Would you care for an ice, Miss Drake?"

"I should love one."

"Right. Three ices, Jenny-wren. We'll wait for you here." He tossed a florin to her.

For a moment or two they stood in silence. Then Lancaster said, "What do you think of our annual gala?"

"I like it immensely. Jenny and I were watching the Knobbly Knees Competition a moment ago. She was very disappointed that you wouldn't enter."

He laughed. "I gather that particular event caused some gnashing of teeth among the committee. One or two die-hards thought it was beneath the village dignity."

"I'm sure it's not nearly as subversive as the baby show," Clare said. "The mothers whose infants don't win always look daggers at the champion. By the way, who is that woman with the jar of beans?" She had just caught sight of the Purple Lady still remorselessly pursuing possible competitors.

"Where? Oh, that's Miss Bassett, our worthy school-marm. Has she bludgeoned you into guessing numbers, too?"

Clare nodded. "She seems to be a fan of yours."

"God forbid! Here, let's duck behind this stall in case she spots us and tries to unload the rest of her tickets."

They took cover behind the Women's Institute tent and he proffered his cigarette-case.

"Miss Bassett is a worthy soul, but she can talk the hind leg off a donkey. You want to watch out she doesn't inveigle you into one of her Cultural Evenings. She badgered me into giving a talk on botany once." He made an expressive face.

"Oh, *there* you are! I thought you'd gone." Jenny ran up to them with three vanilla wafers.

"I think I should go and see if Miss Lancaster wants any help," Clare said when she had finished the ice.

"Right . . . I'll come with you," said Lancaster.

They were passing the fortune-teller's booth when the awning was drawn aside and Andrea Ashley came out, followed by Paul.

"Hallo there," he said gaily. "Miss Ashley, may I introduce Miss Drake and Mr. Lancaster."

The film-star shook hands with them.

"We've just had our palms read by Gypsy Lee. She's very good," Paul said.

"Don't look so sceptical, Mr. Lancaster." Andrea Ashley smiled up at him. "Why, she told me I would meet a tall, dark stranger in the near future and here you are — right outside her tent."

"Astonishing!" he said sarcastically.

Clare knew that, had he replied to her in that cutting tone, she would have flushed scarlet. But the film-star merely laughed and said lightly, "Oh, I know it's all nonsense, but rather fun, don't you think?"

"Unfortunately some people are foolish enough to take it seriously," Lancaster said repressively.

"What if they do? It can't do anyone much harm to believe they are going to marry a millionaire or cross an ocean." She widened her great dark eyes at him provocatively. It was a trick that Clare had seen her use on the screen, and the hero of the film always succumbed immediately. But if anything Lancaster's expression grew colder.

"Fortune-telling, horoscopes, football pools . . . they're all foolish forms of escapism," he said tersely.

"Well, I suppose that applies to movies, too," the actress observed dryly. "Don't you approve of films either, Mr. Lancaster?"

He shrugged. "I seldom go to the cinema, but I should say that the average film is designed to appeal to a very low level of intelligence."

"Quite right, too," Paul put in cheerfully. "I go to the pictures to cheer myself up, not to wallow in gloomy drama." Although his tone was light, Clare saw a glint of anger in his eyes, and knew he was furious with Lancaster for the scathing criticism.

"I think we ought to get along to the stall," she suggested hastily.

"See you later then." Paul smiled at her, and shepherded Miss Ashley away. It was impossible to judge whether she had been offended.

"How lovely she is," Clare said deliberately, when they were out of earshot.

"If you admire that flamboyant type of looks," Lancaster replied shortly.

"Yes, I do. I think she's one of the most beautiful girls I've ever seen."

"And probably as hard as nails."

"Why on earth should she be? I thought she seemed very natural and friendly."

His mouth curled contemptuously. "Yes, good looks have a curiously hypnotic effect on most people. Unfortunately they generally mask a less attractive disposition."

"That's absurd," Clare said bluntly. "I've never agreed with the old maxim about beauty being only skin deep. Why should attractive people be any less likeable than plain ones?"

"Because they know they are attractive, as you put it, and use their looks for their own ends."

"But you can't possibly generalise," Clare argued. "It's like saying that people with receding chins are weak or that stout people are good-natured. They are just clichés."

He made no reply and, irritated by his sardonic expression, she said, "You don't like women very much whether they are beautiful or not, do you, Mr. Lancaster?"

He frowned, and she guessed that the impulsive accusation had hit home. For a moment she thought he was going to ignore the remark, and then he said slowly, "I have found that, as a sex, women are not notably trustworthy."

She was about to refute this charge with some vigour when she realised that they had reached his aunt's stall. Miss Lancaster was in the process of selling the last item of stock, a pea-green knitted tea-cosy.

"There we are . . . completely sold out!" the old lady said with satisfaction as the customer departed. "Now I must check our takings and deposit them with the Vicar. We seem to have done very well indeed, much better than last year. Would you just help me to count the money, my dears; I don't want to miss the baby show at half-past five."

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The following afternoon Clare set out for a walk. She was about to turn off the highway and explore a field path when there was a loud hooting behind her and she saw Paul's cream coupé hurtling along the road.

"I've just been round to fetch you," he said, pulling up beside her. "They told me you couldn't have gone far. I wondered if you'd care to drive over to Sheringham?"

"I'm not really dressed for civilisation," Clare said, looking down at her denim skirt and serviceable walking shoes. The day was dull and she had pulled a warm but shabby jersey over her cotton shirt.

"You look perfectly civilised to me," Paul said, holding the door open. "Come on. It's not much of a day and that path only leads to an old quarry."

It was not until they had reached Sheringham and were ensconced in a quiet corner of a teashop that he mentioned the fête.

"You looked very charming in that green dress yesterday," he said when a waitress had taken his order for hot buttered scones and cakes.

"Thank you. As charming as Miss Ashley?" Clare enquired impishly.

To her surprise he did not parry the question with the easy gallantry she expected.

"She's a very lovely girl," he said seriously. "But I doubt if she has much character."

"Do you think character is important?" Clare asked. "That doesn't tally with your remarks on the beach the other day. You said then that women were either beautiful or good."

"Perhaps I'm revising my ideas. Why were you so embarrassed when we met outside the gipsy's tent?"

"I was afraid Miss Ashley must have been offended by Mr. Lancaster's remarks about films."

Paul grinned. "He was a bit forthright. As a matter of fact, she lapped it up. Women often fall for that high-handed manner of his."

The waitress brought their tea and Clare poured out.

"How does it affect you?" Paul asked.

"How does what affect me?"

"David's touch-me-not attitude."

"Mr. Lancaster's manner is not really my concern," she said evasively.

"Oh come, don't pretend to be so detached. He's quite a good-looking chap, or hadn't you noticed?"

"Yes, I suppose he is," she admitted.

"But it doesn't take your mind off your work?"

"Of course not. How absurd! You seem to be obsessed with people's emotional relationships," she said briskly.

He laughed. "Don't be so vehement. I shall suspect you of hiding your true feelings. Tell me, what are you going to do when his book is finished?"

"I haven't decided yet. I have a brother in Kenya, I might go out to him. I dare say I could get a post of some sort, and I should like to travel."

After tea they strolled along the front and Paul entertained her with amusing descriptions of some of the eccentric characters he had met on his last visit to the Riviera. He was an excellent raconteur, and the unaccountable depression which had prompted her to go for a solitary walk was soon completely dispelled. By the time they returned to the car her eyes were alight with laughter.

"That's better," he said as they started back. "You seemed a bit blue earlier on."

"Yes, I was, but I feel much better now," she said gratefully. It was difficult to be forlorn in Paul's company. Not that she had any reason for feeling low. Yet lately, quite apart from her upsetting dream, her normally even temperament had given place to variable moods of elation and dejection.

"I hear Miss Lancaster is painting you," Paul said.

Clare nodded. "I had no idea how difficult it was to stay completely still for any length of time. The trouble is I'm supposed to be a mermaid, and they seem to sit in most odd positions."

"I told you you looked like a mermaid. What do you wear? The green bathing-suit?"

"No, a garland of seaweed. And Miss Lancaster is going to buy a salmon and copy the scales for my tail." Catching sight of his expression, she said, "I know it sounds mad, but actually it's a serious picture. Mr. Lancaster roared with laughter when he heard about the sal-

mon, and his aunt was quite annoyed. You see, she's planning to submit it to the Royal Academy."

"Good for her. I hope I have as much spirit at her age. Is one allowed a preview?"

"No. She hates people to see her things before they are finished. Even I am not allowed to look."

"What is the pose?" Paul asked. "Are you holding a shell to your ear or combing your hair with a fish-bone?"

"I shan't tell you anything if you are going to make fun," Clare said severely.

"I'm sorry," he said penitently. "I shouldn't be surprised if it is a great success. As a matter of fact, the old lady is a surprisingly accomplished artist, and I can't imagine a better model for a lorelei than yourself."

Seeing the mischievous twinkle in her eyes, he said, "Will you ever take me seriously, I wonder?"

"Should I?" she asked teasingly.

To her surprise a rather sombre expression crossed his good-looking face.

Then he shrugged and grinned. "Maybe not. But even philanderers have their sober moments, you know."

Later Clare was to remember that remark.

*

"Are you feeling off-colour, my dear? You look so pale and you hardly touched your lunch."

Clare mustered a wan smile. "I didn't sleep very well," she admitted. "I expect it's this thundery weather."

"Yes, it is trying," Miss Lancaster agreed. "However, the forecast says rain, so perhaps it won't be quite so close this evening. One hardly likes to grumble at the fine weather when last year was so appallingly cold, but I must say that this excessive heat is extremely tiring, and so bad for the crops. The garden is quite parched."

She went on to compare the recent prolonged heat-wave with the dry seasons and torrential monsoons of

India, and Clare was relieved when there was no further reference to her own pallor and lack of appetite.

It was three days now since the cable had arrived from Kenya informing her that Hal had been seriously injured in a motor accident. Three days of almost unbearable tension and anxiety.

Fortunately she had been alone in the house when the telegraph boy had delivered the cable. At first, she had felt nothing but a strange numbness. Then the full impact of the news had hit her like a blow under the heart, and she had gone up to her room and lain face down on the bed, tortured with worry. If Hal died. . . .

By the time the family had returned she had forced herself to appear calm, dreading their sympathy and concern if they knew what had happened.

The days seemed interminable and the nights even worse. If only Kenya was not so far away! If only she could be there with him!

Now, exhausted by lack of sleep, she awaited the second cable . . . "we regret to inform you" . . . Oh no! Not Hal! Not the one person she had left in the world!

"Miss Drake!"

She looked up dazedly, so immersed in her thoughts that she had not heard Lancaster come into the room.

"I'd like to do some revision on that last chapter," he said.

She followed him into the study, forcing her weary brain into alertness.

They worked steadily for half an hour until Lancaster said, "Would you read back that last paragraph, please."

The shorthand symbols seemed to dance before her eyes. "Dear Sir, with reference to your consignment of coconuts -" She stopped abruptly. This had nothing to do with sand-dune vegetation.

"Well?"

She bit her lip. "I'm sorry. I wasn't concentrating."

Expecting a biting reproof, she was startled when he said quietly, "What's the trouble? Perhaps I can help."

"Why, nothing . . . that is —"

"Look, I didn't dictate that piece of nonsense just to make you feel a fool. It's obvious you don't feel well or are worrying about something."

"I'm just a bit tired," she said dully.

The crunch of footsteps on the gravel path distracted them.

"Hallo, what's this? A wire for somebody?" Lancaster said, looking out of the window.

Clare's heart seemed to stop beating. She felt ice-cold and deadly sick. This was it. This was the moment she had dreaded. Rigid with tension, she heard the doorbell ring and Hilda's heavy footsteps cross the hall. There was a murmur of voices and then the door opened.

"A telegraph message for you, Miss Drake."

With stark horror she looked at the envelope. I must be calm, she thought frantically. I mustn't let them see. . . .

"Operation successful. Your brother making good progress. No further cause for anxiety."

She had been so sure of hearing the worst that for a moment or two the words were meaningless. Then, with a surge of relief that left her dizzy and trembling, she realised that all was well. Hal was not going to die.

"Are you all right?" Lancaster said quickly.

She realised suddenly that he was holding her arm and that both he and Hilda were looking as if they expected her to collapse at their feet.

"Yes, of course. It's not bad news," she stammered, overwhelmed with relief.

"I never did like those telegraph messages," Hilda said. "Give you a proper shock, they do." She went out, muttering disapproval.

"I should sit down," Lancaster advised. "You look a bit winded."

"Yes, I think I will. You see I expected to hear –" her voice tailed off and she handed him the cable in mute explanation.

"You knew he was ill, then?" Lancaster said when he had read it.

"Yes. There was another cable three days ago. They said he was critically ill, that there wasn't much hope."

"You poor kid. So that's what the trouble was." The compassion in his voice startled her. "I think a tot of rum would do you good," he said gently. "I expect you feel a bit shaky."

She watched him cross to the cabinet and fill a glass.

"Here you are." He smiled and patted her shoulder reassuringly.

Then, to her intense shame, Clare felt her lips begin to quiver. The tears which all through the long days and nights of waiting she had been unable to shed suddenly welled up and spilled down her cheeks, and she trembled so violently that the rum splashed over the edge of the glass and on to her hand.

"I'm terribly sorry. . . ." A gasping sob choked her and she fumbled blindly for a handkerchief.

Lancaster removed the glass from her shaking fingers and drew her to her feet. But it was not until the tide of reaction had spent itself that she realised he was holding her in his arms.

CHAPTER V

FLUSHING crimson, Clare drew away. What must he think of her!

"Now, blow your nose and drink up the rum," Lancaster said calmly.

On the surface he seemed unperturbed by her outburst, but she felt sure that inwardly he must be disgusted by such an exhibition. Yet it was his sympathy – the compassionate tone in which he had said, "You poor kid" – that had snapped her control.

Obediently she drank the rum, gasping at its fiery taste.

"I'm sorry to make such a fool of myself, Mr. Lancaster," she apologised, a quaver in her voice.

"That's all right. You can't bottle things up for ever." He lit a cigarette and handed it to her. "You know, I think it's time you called me David."

"Oh . . . yes, if you wish," she stammered.

"You should have told us when the first cable came. It's not a good thing to keep serious worries to yourself. I don't suppose you've had much sleep lately. It might be a good idea to go to bed after supper and catch up with some rest."

"I don't feel at all tired now," she said, smiling for the first time for several days. "Besides, there's the sand-dune section to finish."

"That can wait," he said firmly.

Aware that her tears must have streaked her make-up, Clare said, "May I go up and tidy myself?"

"Of course. I could do with a change of shirt."

For the first time she noticed that there was a moist patch on the shoulder of his shirt.

"I'm very sorry," she said, blushing again.

"Not at all," he said politely, opening the door for her.

*

At tea-time Jenny announced that she had made friends with two American children who were spending a caravan holiday just outside the village.

"Their names are Annabel and Tod, short for Tod-house," she said. "And their mother wears a bikini and their father has his hair cut like a toothbrush."

"So I suppose we may expect to find blobs of chewing-gum all over the house if transatlantic relations ripen," David said dryly.

"Yes, they gave me two packets," Jenny said. "Can I go over there again after tea?"

"If you're sure they don't mind having you around."

"Oh no. Mrs. Harker said I could go whenever I liked."

"And I must be off to the Women's Institute meeting," Miss Lancaster said. "Would you care to come with me, Clare? We're having a lecture on pewter by a schoolmaster from Collingford."

Before Clare could reply, David said, "I'm taking her for a sailing lesson, Aunt Leo."

"Do keep your eye on the weather, dear," Miss Lancaster urged him. "I'm sure there will be a storm before long."

"We will." He glanced at Clare's dress. "I should change into slacks and bring a sweater with you, just in case we get caught in an unexpected downpour."

Clare found that, far from being annoyed at his high-handed method of inviting her to sail, she felt a definite flutter of anticipatory excitement at the prospect. After her immediate confusion at having sobbed all over his chest, she had realised that the situation had its funny side.

Normally he was the last person one would imagine comforting a weeping woman (such a situation was more in Paul's line), yet he had coped with her outburst with surprising tact and kindness.

What an enigma the man was, she reflected. She had not forgotten his disparaging remarks on the night of her arrival; and then there had been the incident at the fête when he had been so abominably boorish to Andrea Ashley. Yet, when he chose, he could be very likeable. It was most confusing.



An hour later they moored the dinghy in a shallow inlet and walked round the point to the beach.

Once they had passed through the tricky channel between the marsh beds, David had allowed her to take the tiller, explaining how to harness the wind so that the *Curlew* skimmed steadily over the water. He was a patient instructor, and although there seemed to be a confusing number of technical terms, with each tack her confidence and pleasure grew.

"Were you a Girl Guide?" he asked, as they sat down on the shingle.

"No, I wasn't. Why?"

He took two lengths of rope out of his trouser pocket.

"I'd better teach you some basic knots. It's not much use being able to sail if you can't tie your craft securely when you land. Now, this is the clove hitch."

He thrust a piece of driftwood into the sand and proceeded to demonstrate a clove hitch and round turn.

While she was practising the knots he said, "Would you rather have gone to the W.I. lecture?"

"No, I'm not especially interested in pewter." She paused and added, "I didn't have much choice, did I?"

He shot a quick glance at her.

"I thought it would do you good to come out here for an hour or so."

She smiled at him. "Yes, it has. There's something very calming about the sound of the sea. Like organ music. I remember reading a poem about it once. I think it was by Byron...." She wrinkled her forehead, trying to recall the words.

"'There is a pleasure in the pathless woods'..." he said quietly.

"Yes, that's it. How does it go on?"

"'There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society, where none intrudes,
By the deep sea, and music in its roar.'"

She was silent for a while, unexpectedly moved by the words of the poem and the way he had said them.

"How sad it sounds," she said presently. "Like a renunciation."

"I imagine that is what most of us would like to do," he said. "Renounce the world and find a lonely shore well away from the chaos of modern life. Unfortunately even isolation costs money these days."

"Would you really like to do that?" Clare asked curiously.

"Certainly. The difficulty is finding a suitable retreat. Fifty years ago one could have sailed off to the South Seas, but now there are very few places where living conditions are favourable which have escaped our so-called civilisation."

"You could build yourself a hut on these dunes and become the hermit of Clint."

"Whereupon I should be besieged by newspaper reporters and sight-seers, followed by the sanitary inspector and a deputation from the local council."

Clare laughed. "Yes, I suppose so. Besides, now that

the rabbits have been exterminated you'd have a rather limited diet."

She watched a handful of sand trickle between her fingers.

"I suppose most people have secret dreams of an ideal life. That's what I came to hate in London – the feeling of being trapped in an enormous treadmill. I used to watch people in the tube, and you could tell from their faces that most of them were waging an endless struggle against grocery bills and school fees and mortgages. I suppose that is why so many people fill in football pools, because it's their one faint chance of escaping from the daily grind."

He nodded. "Yes, poor devils. And when one of them does win a fortune they are so conditioned to a humdrum existence that they have no idea how to cope with the sudden change."

He tossed a pebble at a clump of sea-rocket. "What would you do if you could choose how to live?"

Clare gazed thoughtfully out to sea, her arms clasped round her updrawn knees. "My ideal life doesn't depend on a windfall or a desert island. I should like to marry and have a house in the country and three children."

"That shouldn't be difficult to achieve."

"No . . . except that marriage seems to be even more of a gamble than football pools."

"Marriage is like any other partnership, I imagine. Providing you undertake the contract with a clear idea of the commitments and liabilities involved. Of course, if the practical issues are confused with a lot of emotional nonsense . . ." He shrugged expressively.

"You mean love?" she said levelly.

He shrugged again. "You can call it that, I suppose."

"I don't think I should care for a marriage on the line of a business contract," she replied crisply, chilled by his sarcastic tone.

"It works satisfactorily in other countries."

"Possibly, where women are content to be glorified housekeepers. You can hardly expect such a system to apply to England where most girls earn their living from the age of eighteen or even younger, and are used to being treated as intelligent and responsible in a wider sphere than the kitchen and nursery."

"Surely from a woman's point of view the object of marriage is to gain financial security – luxury if she is lucky – in return for which she undertakes to run a home and produce children."

"That may have been true of our grandmothers, but it certainly isn't today. I've known several women whose standard of living went down with a jolt when they married."

"That must have made life pretty hellish for their husbands," he observed sardonically.

"Not at all," Clare countered indignantly. "We aren't all greedy materialists, you know." She broke off abruptly. "Sorry, I was beginning to sound like counsel for the defence. Are there any more knots I should know?"

"Two are enough for one lesson. We'd better get back. The tide will be turning in half an hour."

Clare stood up and dusted the sand from her slacks. In the setting sun the sea was flecked with crimson and gold. She wished their conversation had not verged on disagreement. Now, no doubt, he would resume his previous formality and the comfortable atmosphere in which the evening had begun would be lost.

She followed him round the point, watching his long rhythmic strides. It occurred to her that the way a man walked gave a good indication of his character. Paul moved leisurely, with an indolent grace that reflected his lazy, easy-going attitude to life. David strode along with a purposeful swing, head erect, so that one had to quicken one's pace to keep abreast of him. The very set

of his broad shoulders gave the impression that here was a man who would not be deflected from his chosen course by extraneous circumstances. Arrogance and independence were implicit in every line of his body.

At the water's edge he turned and waited for her to catch up.

"Do you think you can handle her as far as the channel?"

"I'll try." She scrambled into the stern.

"The treatment has worked. You've got some colour in your cheeks again." He smiled, and all at once the earlier mood was recaptured.

A gusty wind had risen suddenly, and as they neared the channel and David took the helm the first slow drops of rain pricked her face. By the time they reached the moorings and had lowered the sail, it was beginning to pour down.

"Come on. We'll have to run for it."

He grabbed her hand and pulled her up the muddy bank on to the towpath.

They had barely reached the house when there was a deafening clap of thunder and the heavens opened.

"Just as well we turned back when we did," David said. "I noticed those storm clouds piling up in the east, but I didn't think they would be over us so quickly."

"I hope Jenny isn't out in this downpour," Clare said anxiously, as a streak of forked lightning splintered the dark sky.

"Hilda, is Jenny back?" David called.

Hilda came out of the kitchen, looking worried.

"No, she isn't, Mr. David."

He looked at his watch.

"Quarter to nine. I should think she would have left her American friends by now. Can you drive?" he asked Clare.

She nodded.

"Would you mind taking the car up the main road? I'll go over the fields in case she's taken the short-cut. I don't like the idea of her being out alone in this storm."

"Yes, of course I will," Clare said swiftly.

"Here's the ignition key, and you'd better take this old mac."

She took the key from him and was obediently buttoning the mackintosh when there was a scuffle outside the front door and Jenny and Paul Mallinson burst in.

"Whew, what a night!" Paul gasped, slamming the door behind them.

"Mercy on us, you're soaked through, child!" Hilda exclaimed at the sight of Jenny's sodden dress and dripping hair.

"We were just coming to look for you," David said. "You'd better get those wet things off."

"Can I have some rum?" Jenny asked hopefully.

"Rum, indeed! It's a hot bath and bread and milk for you, young lady," Hilda admonished her. "Upstairs with you this minute or my good floor will be ruined." She hustled the child away.

"I picked her up on the main road," Paul said, mopping his face with a handkerchief. "I gather she had been visiting the family who've parked their caravan in old Harrison's meadow."

"Yes, they're Americans with a couple of kids about Jenny's age," said David.

"I suppose it was fine when she started out or they wouldn't have let her go. This squall blew up in a matter of minutes," Paul said, raising his voice against a roll of thunder.

"Come into the sitting-room. We've just got back from a sail. Aunt Leo is at a W.I. meeting."

"Shall I make a pot of coffee as Hilda is busy looking after Jenny?" Clare suggested.

"If you wouldn't mind."

"Can we give you a hand?" Paul asked.

"No, thanks. It won't take a minute."

When she carried the coffee tray into the sitting-room the two men were sitting by the window watching the storm. They both rose to their feet at her arrival, and Paul took the tray and set it on a low table.

"M'm, smells excellent. You seem to have all the accomplishments," he said, smiling.

Clare poured out and then settled back in an arm-chair.

"I thought women were nervous of thunder," Paul said, a moment after a particularly loud roll had reverberated overhead.

"I enjoy storms – as long as I'm not out in them," Clare said.

"Don't tell me you're also fond of mice!"

"Why, yes, I am. My brother and I kept a 'mousery' for years when we were children. I certainly don't scream and jump on the nearest chair at the sight of one, if that's what you mean."

Paul made a droll face. "What are women coming to?" he protested with mock gravity.

"Well, I suppose that in theory feminine timidity is very touching, but I should think that in practice it could be quite infuriating," Clare said seriously.

"I agree. Nothing is more maddening than a woman who has hysterics in an emergency," David put in.

Paul gave him a rather mocking glance. "Oh, agreed, in the case of a genuine emergency," he said lightly. "But, in general, I deplore this tendency for women to be practical and independent. It leaves one so little scope," he added wickedly.

"All right. Next time there's a storm or I see a mouse, I'll remember to fling myself into your arms and swoon away," Clare answered, laughing. She was so accustomed to this light exchange of badinage with Paul that when she noticed a repressive frown on David's face she

flushed, feeling as if she had been guilty of a remark in bad taste.

To make matters worse Paul said, "Unfortunately David is more likely to be in the happy position of reviving you than I am."

"It seems to be passing over. The sky is getting bright again," Clare said hastily. "More coffee?"

"Not for me," said David. "I think I must have dropped my jack-knife on the towpath. If you'll excuse me I'll go and look for it."

When he had gone, Paul said, "You know, I'd hoped that you would have an enlivening influence on the old fellow, but I'm afraid he's past reclaim."

"We can't all be frivolous," Clare said with a touch of asperity.

"Is that a nasty dig at me?" he asked gaily.

"No . . . but you talk as if he were in his dotage. He's not much older than you are."

"Not in years, perhaps."

"Well, enough of David," Paul said impatiently. "I was coming over to see you when I picked up Jenny. I wondered if you would like to dine and dance at a rather good club I know one evening next week. It isn't good for you to cut yourself off from the gay life for too long."

"I should like to come," Clare said. "Thank you, Paul."

"How about next Wednesday?"

"That would be fine."

"Right. Well, I'd better be off. I suspect that David thinks I'm an unsuitable influence on you."

"What nonsense!" She rose to see him out.

"Perhaps if I were in his place I should feel the same way," he said. "Even if you aren't afraid of thunderstorms or mice, you have a knack of bringing out the strong protective instinct, my poppet."

When he had gone, Clare returned to the sitting-room

and opened the windows. The sky was dusky now, but as clear as if the storm had never been.

She saw David coming up the garden and called, "Did you find your knife?"

"Yes. By a stroke of luck it had fallen on a patch of shingle and not in the mud," he answered.

"Paul has gone home. The coffee is still warm, if you would like another cup."

"Thanks." He disappeared round the side of the house and a moment later she heard him wiping his feet on the mat.

"I expect Miss Lancaster will be home soon," Clare said when he came into the room.

They were silent for some minutes, and then David said suddenly, "You said just now that you were not afraid of storms as long as you were not out in them. Yet you agreed to take the car and look for Jenny."

"That isn't exactly being out in a storm. I meant that I shouldn't care to be out in the fields if the lightning was bad. I don't suppose anyone would."

"And if we had got caught while we were coming up the creek?"

"You would have known what to do."

He glanced at her and she added, "It's the feeling of being alone with the elements that is rather frightening. What would have happened if we had been caught?"

"Nothing much. We'd have been tossed about a bit and got drenched through."

"I should think a real storm in the middle of the ocean must be a terrifying experience. Of course I've only seen them in films, but even quite large ships look like pieces of matchwood."

"Yes, it is terrifying," he said. "It makes you realise how puny we really are. I remember once—" He stopped short.

"Yes?" Clare said encouragingly.

"Oh, nothing. I was just about to bore you with some sea-going reminiscences."

"They wouldn't bore me."

"Nevertheless I won't risk it. Few things are more wearisome than other people's experiences in retrospect."

Clare studied him thoughtfully. He was looking out of the window, so she knew that she would have time to look away if he turned.

Why was he so prickly? So unwilling to respond to overtures of friendship? Once or twice he had relaxed and talked easily and naturally, but these moods never lasted. One could never be sure that one's next remark would not be received with chilly silence or a veiled rebuff. His temperament seemed to be like the weather this evening. One moment the sky was glowing with opalescent sunset colours, the next it was dark and lowering. Why?

Her consideration of the problem was interrupted by Miss Lancaster's return.

"I'll go up and say good night to Jenny," David said when his aunt had recounted the more interesting parts of the lecture on pewter to them.

"Did you enjoy your sailing lesson?" she asked Clare when he had gone out.

"Yes. You were right about the weather. We were almost caught by the storm, and Jenny came home absolutely soaked. Fortunately Paul met her on the road and drove her the rest of the way."

"I was afraid you might be out in it," Miss Lancaster said. "You would have been quite safe with David, but it would have been unpleasant on the water."

Later, as Clare undressed in her room, the phrase "quite safe with David" rose to the surface of her thoughts.

She remembered what she had said jokingly to Paul about flinging herself into his arms. Yet if anything did

happen to cause her genuine alarm while she was with both men, she knew that it would be David to whom she would instinctively turn for protection and comfort.

In spite of his thorny manner and curt speech, he contrived to inspire confidence. She could not imagine him losing his nerve however desperate the situation, and while she did not doubt that in any given circumstances Paul would do his best to cope, she knew somehow that Paul's best would be far behind David's best.

She found herself imagining a crisis in which she would turn to David for reassurance, and find his arms encircling her, his long lithe body shielding her from danger.

For Pete's sake, she thought crossly, why do I delude myself? He'd doubtless expect me to fend for myself and curse me roundly if I got in his way.

And with this self-admonitory thought she fell asleep.

CHAPTER VI

"ARE you ready, Clare? Paul is here. He's brought you some flowers. Gosh . . . what a smashing dress! You look super."

Jenny advanced into the bedroom with something close to reverence on her expressive little face.

"I wish I were old enough to wear long frocks," she said wistfully.

Clare smiled. "Only five more years to go."

"Five years is *ages*. Hilda says we shall all be blown to smithereens before we know where we are. Aunt Leo told her not to be a pessimist. What exactly is a pessimist?"

"Somebody who looks on the black side of things."

"Well, I don't think she really believes it because she was talking about her pension this morning, and I shall have been grown-up for ages by then," Jenny said reasonably. "Will you be very late coming home?"

"I don't know. Not too late, I shouldn't think. Anyway, I'll tell you all about it in the morning."

"Perhaps you'll have champagne," Jenny suggested with an envious sigh. "I like your scent. What's it called?"

"*In Love*." Clare gathered up her gloves and stole, and took a final look at her reflection.

As Jenny had said, her dress was rather effective. It had been a farewell present from Hal before he left for Africa, and was made of heavy white crêpe which clung to her slender hips and fell in soft folds round her ankles. The bodice was draped like a Grecian tunic, held on either shoulder by a pearl clasp. To match the mood of the dress, she had coiled her hair into a classic knot on the crown of her head and bound it with a string of pearls.

Catching a speculative expression on Jenny's face, she said, "A penny for them?"

"I was thinking it would be fun if Paul fell in love with you. Then you could live here always instead of going away when Uncle David finishes his book."

"I don't think that is very likely," Clare said casually.

"Paul likes you a lot. Don't you like him?"

"Yes, of course. But people don't get married just because they like each other."

"I should think he *nearly* loves you." Jenny wrinkled her freckled nose. "What does *épris* mean?" she added obscurely.

"It's a French word meaning to be charmed by somebody. Why?"

"Because Aunt Leo said that Paul was decidedly *épris* in a certain direction, and I think she meant he was charmed by you."

Clare had an impulse to tell Jenny that she shouldn't listen to other people's conversation, but then she reflected that it was hardly the child's fault if adults made indiscreet remarks in her hearing. In any case, it was possible that Jenny had got hold of the wrong end of the stick and that her aunt had been referring to somebody else. Nevertheless, the remark had ruffled her composure.

Paul was waiting for her in the sitting-room with Lancaster. David had gone out after tea and was not yet back, at which Clare felt a certain measure of relief. Although their relationship had seemed to be more cordial since the day of the second cablegram, she was convinced that he disapproved of her friendship with Paul. Yet although she was glad he was not present to witness their departure, she also felt a tinge of disappointment that he would not see her in her white dress.

Paul sprang up as she rustled into the room.

"Good evening." With a bow, he handed her a spray of orchids.

"How lovely. Thank you." Clare was about to pin them to her dress when he said, "No, don't do that. If I'd known you were going to look like a Greek goddess, I would have brought lilies. Put them on your bag."

"We'll leave the front door unlocked. Enjoy yourself, my dear. Take good care of her, Paul," Miss Lancaster said kindly.

As they drove through the village Paul said, "That's a very attractive dress. Did you lead a wild life in Town?"

"Moderately so. I love dancing. Except when the floor is too crowded to do more than shuffle."

"The Country Club is fairly spacious, and there's a terrace if the indoor floor gets too packed. It's actually a converted manor-house which the owners can't afford to keep up."

It was just beginning to grow dusk as he swung the car into the club gateway. The terrace at the side of the house was illuminated by strings of fairy-lights. A party of American servicemen and their wives were strolling across the lawn towards the floodlit fountain, and the strains of dance music carried on the still evening air.

Paul helped Clare out of the car, which was driven away by a uniformed porter, and they went up the steps into the foyer.

"Good evening, madam. Good evening, Mr. Mallinson. I've kept one of the window tables for you, sir."

The *maitre d' hôtel* hurried forward as they entered the dining-room and ushered them to a table beside tall french windows.

While Paul was discussing the menu with him, Clare had an opportunity to look around. The room was evidently the former drawing-room, and several fine tapestry panels hung on the walls. Above the handsome fireplace, now banked with flowers, hung a full-length portrait of a girl in a white satin crinoline, but it was too far away for Clare to be able to decipher the lettering on

the gilt plaque at the base of the frame. The soft light from two crystal chandeliers was reflected from the crisp damask table-cloths, and each table had a flower design in a silver dish.

"What a delightful room," Clare said, when Paul had concluded a consultation with the wine waiter.

"I thought you would like it. What is more, they have a first-class Swiss chef and an excellent cellar."

"Do the owners still live here?" she asked.

"No, they've moved into the lodge by the gates. The upper rooms are used for private parties, and I believe the commanding officer of one of the American air bases has a flat in the west wing. As a matter of fact, I looked over the place about three years ago when they were trying to sell it. It was in a pretty bad state then, and they couldn't find a buyer, so they scraped some capital together and opened it as a club. It got off to a slow start and then half the county suddenly 'discovered' it, and now . . . well, you can see for yourself."

"What a nice story," Clare said. "It's so sad when lovely old houses have to be demolished or turned into offices. I wonder what would have happened to the girl in the portrait if it had been sold up."

Paul glanced at the picture.

"She would probably be adorning the wall of a New York penthouse," he said. "Or else gathering cobwebs at the back of some poky little junk-shop, poor lass."

"A picture that size would cover a whole wall in a modern house. I once bought a mirror at a sale which had a similar frame. It was being auctioned after the sale of a house in Mayfair. I got it for two pounds, and then of course I couldn't think what on earth to do with it, so eventually I gave it to my landlady, who put it in the bathroom. Such a come-down for it."

After a delectable meal, Paul suggested that they should have their coffee and liqueurs on the terrace. It

was dark now and the fountain glittered in the flood-lights.

"Jenny would be envious if she could see me now," Clare said. "She's aching to be grown-up and go to dances. I expect she'll wake me up at crack of dawn and demand a detailed description of the whole evening."

Paul laughed. "She'll be an attractive little minx in five or six years. By which time I shall be an ageing reprobate with grizzled hair and gout," he added with a wry face. "Come, let's dance and forget such a depressing prospect."

As she had expected, he was an excellent dancer, holding her closely but lightly so that she had no difficulty in following his lead and was able to give herself up to enjoyment of the music. At the end of a lively samba they left the floor and Paul suggested a stroll through the grounds.

"Are you warm enough or shall I fetch your wrap?" he asked.

"No, thank you. It's a lovely night, I shan't feel cold."

He tucked her arm through his, and they crossed the lawn and followed a path which led through a sunken Italian garden sheltered by cypress trees. At the far end of the garden there was a shadowy creeper-covered bower, and as they passed it they heard a smothered laugh and then silence broken by a rapturous murmur.

Involuntarily Clare stiffened and Paul looked down at her.

"What's the matter?" he said softly. "Are you afraid that I brought you out here to make love to you?"

She did not reply, and he drew her round to face him.

"Well?"

"What an impossible question, Paul."

He smiled. "Yes, perhaps so. But your reactions interest me. Did it not occur to you before that I probably would?"

She freed herself from his light clasp and walked on.

"Yes, to be honest, I suppose it did."

"And did you decide what to do when the situation arose?"

"No. I don't plan things like that."

"Surely you knew whether my advances would be welcome or not."

She paused and plucked a leaf from a bush, twirling it between finger and thumb.

"What a most extraordinary conversation."

He laughed and caught her hand and walked on.

"You're an extraordinary girl, my dear. Do you know what your reaction should have been when I asked you if you thought I was going to make love to you?"

"No. What?"

"You should have blushed and fluttered your eyelashes at me and said, 'Why, Paul!' in a very coy voice."

"I should hate to be coy," Clare said firmly. "Would you have preferred it?"

"By no means. I like originality. But you still haven't answered my question."

"Well, if you must know, I should scream for help," she told him teasingly.

He grinned. "It wouldn't do much good. People would say, 'Dear me, that must be Mallinson up to his tricks again', and shake their heads disapprovingly."

"Is that why you brought me out here? To add another scalp to your belt?"

"No. I thought it would be pleasant to be alone with you, but not for that reason."

"But how ungallant," she protested gaily. "Surely it would be more polite to say that you are seething to take me in your arms but propriety forbids you to do so."

"You wouldn't believe me."

"No, I wouldn't," she admitted. "I don't think you give a hoot for propriety, and I suspect that you've never seethed with longing for anything."

"I've discovered that life either gives you what you want or it doesn't – in which case there's not much point in gnashing your teeth."

"That's a retrogressive philosophy. If everyone gave up hope of reaching things which weren't immediately attainable, we should still be living in caves."

"Ah, but I was talking about love," he reminded her.

"What you choose to call love," she corrected him.

He tilted an eyebrow at her. "I believe you're going to moralise. It's time we went back."

They danced again. This time he held her closer than before, and from time to time she caught him smiling down at her with a glint of mockery in his brown eyes.

Between dances they sat on the terrace and drank champagne until Clare said, "No, Paul. If I have another glass I shall begin to be light-headed."

"Oh come, a little champagne won't hurt you."

"No, really," she insisted. "I don't want the evening to be spoilt by a hangover."

"My little Puritan!" he teased, but there was no malice in his tone and he did not press her to have another drink.

It was midnight when they left the club.

"Enjoy yourself?" he asked.

"Yes, very much. It's been a perfect evening."

She sighed luxuriously and leant her head against the back of the seat, feeling pleasantly drowsy yet not tired out.

Paul reached for her hand and she let him take it.

"What a waste of a heavenly night – all the people who are sound asleep in bed, I mean," she murmured.

"Yes. When I was a boy I used to sleep out in a hammock on nights like this. I believe the hooks are still in the summer-house."

He broke off to hoot at a cat which stood in the centre of the road, its eyes gleaming in the glare of the head-

lights. Then, like a dark wraith, it merged into the blackness of the hedgerow.

"But for real star-gazing," he went on, "you have to go out East. I was in Ceylon a couple of years ago, and the stars were like diamonds, the whole sky was alight with them."

As they passed through the village the dashboard clock showed twenty minutes past twelve. Clare gathered her stole round her shoulders. She would have liked to go on driving through the night, lulled by the smooth speed of the big car, with Paul's thumb gently caressing the back of her hand.

"Here we are, safely home," he said, pulling up at the top of the lane.

He helped her out and they walked down the lane to the gate. He swung it open and Clare would have passed through, but his grip on her elbow tightened. She looked enquiringly at him and the next moment his mouth was on hers.

It was a long time since she had been kissed, and after a second or two she yielded to his embrace and kissed him back.

"No cry for help?" he asked softly.

She shook her head.

His lips traced the curve of her cheek, brushed her eyelids and found her mouth again, less gently this time. She submitted to the fiercer pressure for a moment, and then gently disengaged herself. The second kiss had explained something of which she had not been certain.

"Thank you for a wonderful evening, Paul," she said quickly, and ran through the garden and into the house.

She was still standing with her back to the door when she heard his car start up and drive away.

Dear Paul, she thought affectionately. So gay and generous – and so much less of a big bad wolf than he liked to make out. She knew now that she would never feel

anything deeper than friendship for him. His second kiss had proved that. While his lips had been tender she had found pleasure in their caress, but when his arms had tightened and she had felt his heart-beat quicken, there had been no answering flare of passion in her.

It was the same old story. He was good-looking and agreeable and everything, or almost everything, that a woman could wish for in a man. Yet she was not, and never would be, in love with him.

Why? she thought. Why? What is wrong with me?

And then she remembered that another man had looked at her and her whole being had flamed in response.

Suddenly the hall was bright with light. She blinked.

"I thought I heard footsteps," David Lancaster said.

He was standing in the sitting-room doorway, a pipe in one hand, a book in the other.

"You startled me," she stammered. "I thought everyone would be in bed."

"Did you have a pleasant evening?"

"Yes. Delightful." Her stole had slipped to the floor and she bent to pick it up.

"I have some coffee on the stove, if you would care for a cup."

"Thank you. That would be lovely."

He disappeared into the kitchen, and she walked slowly into the sitting-room and sat down in the yellow wing-chair.

Had he waited up for her or had he been reading and forgotten the time?

Automatically she opened her bag and took out a mirror. How awful if she had come in flushed and dishevelled. That would have justified all his suspicions about her.

When he returned with the tray of coffee she was standing by the window, unaware that the green linen curtains were a perfect foil for her white dress and auburn hair.

She turned back to the chair and accepted the cup he offered.

"Cigarette?"

"No, thank you."

His eyes were on her feet and, looking down, she realised that she had slipped off her dancing sandals.

"Oh, I'm sorry. . . ."

"No, don't mind me. I dare say you're tired if you've been on the floor all evening."

"Yes." She told him about the club.

"M'm, I believe they do you very well. I haven't been there. It's an expensive set-up," he said.

"I suppose so," Clare agreed, thinking of the dinner and the champagne.

"Are you getting tired of our quiet life?" he asked.

"Oh no," she said hastily. "I enjoyed tonight very much, but, after all, if one went out every night it would become quite dull and ordinary."

The clock on the bookcase chimed a quarter to one and, finishing her coffee, she said reluctantly, "I'd better go to bed, or I shall be late in the morning. Thank you for the coffee."

"Lie in if you want to," he said.

"Well . . . good night."

"Good night."



In his bedroom at the Hall, Paul Mallinson sat drinking a glass of brandy. He had changed his dinner-jacket for a dark silk dressing-gown, but although it was past one o'clock he did not feel inclined to go to bed.

It was ridiculous, of course, but the evening had left him curiously restive and dissatisfied.

Time I went up to Town and got back into the swing of things, he thought; two months in this place is enough

to unsettle anyone. Yet he knew in his heart that it was not the placid village which was undermining his usual insouciance. It was Clare, confound her.

Why had she whisked away from him so suddenly tonight? Not out of guile – the catch-me-if-you-can technique – of that he was sure. Wilier girls than Clare Drake had tried to snare him, and he was convinced that there was no cunning or artifice in her.

Paul, my boy, you're in danger . . . grave danger, he told himself. If you don't watch out you'll be fool enough to fall for her. Well, why not? She is attractive, damned attractive, and she has brains too, which is more than you can say for most of 'em.

On the other hand, marriage meant settling down, and Clare wouldn't be the kind to overlook an occasional lapse from the straight and narrow. Not that a fellow would be driven to seeking outside diversions if he was married to her. Under that cool exterior of hers there was fire. She probably didn't know it herself yet, but one of these days. . . .

That was another point in her favour. She was what people called "wholesome". Not one of your frisky little gadabouts who bestowed their favours anywhere and everywhere.

Like most men who have played fast and loose for years without the faintest twinge of conscience, when Paul thought of marriage it was to a girl who was as innocent as he was experienced.

Yes, he thought soberly, I could do worse. A lot worse. It's worth considering.

As he went through to the bathroom to take a shower, he did not guess that the time would come when his cocksure attitude would be pricked like a balloon. Nor did he guess that in her bedroom under the eaves of Creek House Clare was dreaming, not of his kisses but of how it would feel to be kissed by another man.

CHAPTER VII

THE following week Miss Lancaster went to Edinburgh to stay with an invalid friend for a few days. On the morning after her departure, Mr. Alfred Cobble, the village handyman, arrived to paint the kitchen, and during breakfast David suggested that they should take a picnic lunch to the beach, leaving Hilda and Alfred to wrangle undisturbed. Jenny was delighted and rushed upstairs to collect her bathing things, but Clare said she had better stay at home as she had not finished transcribing the last batch of notes.

"Oh, leave them till later," Lancaster said carelessly. "We may as well make the most of this weather, and, in any case, you won't be able to concentrate once Hilda and Alfred start haranguing each other. She can't stand the old chap, although he's quite a competent decorator. By the way, have you heard from your brother yet?"

"Yes, indirectly." She indicated the airmail envelope lying by her plate. "His right arm is bandaged, so a nurse has written for him. He seems very cheerful, and says he'll be out of hospital in about ten days."

"Good. It's been a worrying time for you."

"It would have been much worse if I had been in London. You've all been terribly kind," Clare said gratefully.

David gave her a keen glance. He seemed about to say something and then changed his mind.

By ten o'clock they were on the beach.

Jenny kicked off her sandals. "I'm going to swim. Race you in, Uncle David!"

Both she and David had their bathing kit under their shirts and jeans, but Clare had to change. She watched them pelting down the beach before retiring behind a

sand-dune to put on her own swimsuit.

He was very good with children, she reflected. It was a pity he had none of his own, for Jenny obviously adored him and, whatever he might be like with other people, he was unfailingly good-tempered and patient with his tomboy niece. But to have children one had to have a wife, and good-humour and patience were totally lacking in his attitude to women.

By the time she had changed, they were out of the water and playing leap-frog. The sea was very warm, and, having waded in up to her waist, Clare duck-dived into a breaker, rolled on to her back and floated lazily down-shore, enjoying the gentle rocking motion and the sunlight on her face.

She was lost in an idle sea-dream when there was a commotion in the water beside her and Jenny's glistening head bobbed up.

"Isn't it glorious! Practically boiling. I wish Josh wasn't such a wretched old landlubber. We've been trying to persuade him to come in, but he won't budge. Look!"

They both trod water and Clare saw that David was standing in the shallows making encouraging noises to the Boxer, which sat disdainfully at the water's edge, retreating hastily when a ripple spread too close to his paws.

"It's no use: he just isn't a water-dog," David shouted. He moved into deeper water and swam towards them with a powerful crawl stroke.

"Shall I fetch the beach ball, Uncle David?"

"Yes, if you like, Toots."

"There must be a fish in the family," Clare said, watching the child skim away. "She's got a very strong stroke for her age."

"Yes, she's a game little thing," David agreed. In spite of his casual tone there was a glint of affectionate pride in his eyes.

He was standing chest-deep, his broad shoulders glist-

ening in the sunlight. This is how a man should be, Clare thought suddenly. Not puny and pale and round-shouldered, but bronzed and straight and strong. He half turned to grasp a floating strand of sea-weed, and she saw the muscles tighten under his smooth brown skin. Absorbed in aesthetic pleasure, she did not notice a breaker sweeping in from the sand-bar, and it swept her off balance.

“Are you all right?”

A hand gripped her arm and she was pulled to the surface, the breath knocked out of her by the unexpected force of the wave. She nodded, gasping and coughing.

“Now you see her, now you don’t,” he said, laughing. “How much did you swallow?”

“It felt like a gallon!”

“Better now?”

She nodded. “It was my own fault. I wasn’t on the lookout.”

“M’m, it’s an unpleasant feeling when a breaker crashes right on top of you like that.”

“Thanks for fishing me up.”

“Look out, here comes another one,” he warned.

Instinctively she clutched his arm for support, but the second wave broke before it reached them and swirled harmlessly past in a slackening flurry of foam.

“We’re in the wrong place. We should be either farther out or nearer the beach,” he said.

“Yes. I don’t—”

Her voice tailed off as she met his eyes. Her heart began to beat in slow heavy thumps. A sensation that she had never felt before swept through her; a strange compound of fear and longing.

Beneath the water his hands touched her waist, lightly at first and then painfully hard. The muscles at his jaw clenched and his eyes glittered oddly. Already they were only a few inches apart, but she felt herself being drawn

close, whether by his hands on her waist or by the surge of the tide or her own volition she could not tell. She only knew that in a matter of seconds she would be in his arms.

“Coo-ee!” Jenny’s voice echoed thinly across the water.
“Clare! David! Come on!”

David’s head lifted sharply and a spasm of something close to fury crossed his face. Then it was gone and his expression was impassive again. Without a word he released her and plunged away, churning up a shower of spray that fell in small chill drops on her bare shoulders.

The rest of the morning was spent playing beach-ball. After lunch Jenny went off with Josh to search for amber, and David lit a cigarette and disappeared over the dunes.

Clare spread out her towel and lay down. She was glad to be alone for a while to sort out her confused thoughts. But the morning’s exertion had made her drowsy, and after a few minutes her eyelids fluttered and closed.

The shrill cry of a gull woke her, and she rolled over and felt for her watch, which was in the pocket of her beach bag. Ten past three. She must have been asleep for over an hour. Not that it mattered particularly, she thought, stretching luxuriously. How blue the sky was, the exact shade of the Bristol glass jug which was one of her treasures.

“The sky, one blue interminable arch, without a breeze, a wing, a cloud. . . .”

Suddenly she became aware that she was not alone. Someone was close by, watching her. With the quick uprush of embarrassed annoyance that people feel when they are caught out in a moment of complete relaxation, she sat up and looked round.

A few feet away from her David was lounging on the sand.

“I thought you had gone for a walk,” she said shortly.

“I did. I came back about half an hour ago. You were

sound asleep."

His eyes held hers for a moment, and then travelled slowly down the length of her slim body and graceful sunburned legs.

A wave of hot colour suffused her cheeks. How dared he look at her like that?

"Where is Jenny?" she asked stiffly.

"About half a mile up the beach."

Clare reached for her linen jacket and shrugged it on.

"Cold?" he asked.

"Yes, just a bit chilly," she said.

The sun was beating down with unabated heat. Nobody could possibly feel cold on such an afternoon. She knew it, and she knew that he knew it and was laughing at her prevarication.

"Cigarette?"

"Thank you." She turned, expecting that he would toss one over to her, but instead he moved closer.

"Why were you angry just now?" he asked, when both their cigarettes were alight.

She shot a quick glance at him.

"I thought I was alone. It's rather unnerving to find oneself being watched."

"I see." A slight smile curved his mouth. "I apologise. Next time I'll wake you up."

Suddenly her annoyance evaporated. There was really no reason to be cross. If Paul had looked at her in that particular way, she would not have been up in arms. She wished now that she had not put her jacket on, but to remove it would make her look even more of a fool. She drew on her cigarette, trying to think of something to say. The silence since his last remark had lasted rather too long.

"You have lovely hair," he said quietly.

Startled, she gaped at him. It was the first time he had made any personal remark, and she was not sure how to

deal with it.

Before she could reply, he put up a hand and touched a loose curl which had blown across her forehead. Once again she felt fear and delight quickening in her.

His finger-tips touched her temple and traced the delicate curve of her cheek. Then with a swift movement his hand cupped her head and he pulled her roughly against him.

For a full minute she lay against his heart while he gazed down at her upturned face. With a surge of joy she felt the rapid beat of his heart beneath her hand and the taut strength of the arms enfolding her. Then, as abruptly as he had caught her, he let her go.

Shocked out of the trembling languor which had been stealing over her during those sixty seconds in his arms, Clare was about to make a biting remark when, just in time, she saw the reason for his extraordinary behaviour.

"Gosh, I'm thirsty. Is there another bottle of lemonade in the basket?" Jenny enquired hopefully, flopping down beside them.

"I think so, Toots." Lancaster foraged in the hamper. "Would you like a drink, Clare?"

"Please." She avoided his glance. Was he really as calm as he sounded? Her own heart was still thumping crazily, and she found difficulty in holding the plastic beaker steady when he handed it to her.

"A penny for them?" he said, his eyes alight with wicked laughter.

"My mind was a complete blank," she said demurely, daring him to challenge it.

"I'm going for another swim," Jenny announced, jumping up.

David's brows arched quizically. Clare knew what he meant. Either they could join Jenny in the sea or they could stay behind. The choice lay with her. For an instant she was tempted to stay, to be bold and brazen. Then it

occurred to her that, in his present mood, he was quite capable of leaving her behind. It was better that he should take her for a coward than that she should risk the humiliation of sitting there alone. If only she didn't have this treacherous yearning to be in his arms again.

"I'll come with you, Jenny," she said, watching him out of the corner of her eye.

But his face was unreadable, and for a dreadful moment she wondered if he had taken her decision as a rebuff. Yet surely he must see that she could not invite his caresses however much she might want to do so.

Walking down the beach she wondered uneasily if it were madness to allow the situation to develop. Until to-day he had shown no sign of being attracted to her – unless one could count the day of the fête when they had met in the hall and he had given her that odd heart quickening look, and, even now, it might be just a mood, a transient relaxation of his normal guardedness engendered by the glorious weather. His behaviour just now had been more in Paul's line – except that Paul had never stirred anything like the same response in her.

Then there was their day-to-day relationship to be considered. Because they lived in the same house and worked elastic hours, it was sometimes hard to remember that he was her employer and she his secretary. In London she had always avoided social or emotional contacts with the men in the office, whether colleagues or superiors, and the feeling that such contacts could be dangerous still persisted. Anyone would think I was a parlourmaid and he the lord of the manor, she thought dryly. Oh dear, how complicated life is.

"Aren't you going to play ball?" A small hand tugged at her arm and she found Jenny gazing curiously at her.

"Sorry, I was in a daze. Yes, I'll play," Clare said hastily.

For the next hour she was too fully occupied in throw-

ing and retrieving the yellow beach-ball to be able to concentrate on the complexities of life.

During tea Jenny chatted volubly, but neither Clare nor David had much to say. Afterwards, as even Jenny seemed to have had enough running about, they continued to lounge on the sand, trying rather half-heartedly to do *The Times* crossword.

"What's that dog after? He's been sniffing your beach-bag for the last five minutes," David said suddenly.

"Josh, what are you up to?"

Clare reached across and gave the Boxer's hindquarters a friendly slap.

"Oh, confound him. I'd forgotten I had a bar of chocolate in there. Come back at once, you greedy beast. Josh! Drop it!"

Josh, feeling neglected, rolled his eyes and retreated, his stubby tail wagging convulsively.

Clare scrambled to her feet and lunged at him, but he dashed out of reach, and, laughing at his ridiculous expression with the chocolate bulging his soft jowls, she gave chase. She had not bothered to put on her espadrilles after the swim, and as she careered across the sand in pursuit of the dog she felt a sharp pain in the sole of her right foot. It was enough to send her sprawling, and by the time she had picked herself up David and Jenny were beside her.

"What happened? Are you hurt?"

"No, just a fall. I think I've cut my right foot." She balanced on one leg and inspected the injury.

"Goodness, it's bleeding like anything," Jenny said in awe. "Josh, you horrible hound, look what you've done to poor Clare."

"It wasn't his fault. I expect it's just a scratch. Probably from a piece of glass. I should have had my shoes on."

"It's a nasty cut," David interjected. "The first thing is to rinse the sand out with sea water. Hold tight!"

Without waiting for her consent, he swung her into his arms and started down the beach.

"Really this is quite unnecessary. It's hardly anything," Clare protested.

"You can get tetanus from a pinprick," he said briefly. "Jenny, catch that damned dog, will you. If he's eaten the chocolate he'll get a good beating."

"He was only playing," Clare objected.

"Don't argue, my girl."

At the water's edge he set her down and made her hold on to his shoulder while he rinsed her foot.

"H'm, deep but clean," he said presently. "We should have some iodine in the basket, and I've got a clean handkerchief to fix you up till we get home. You won't be able to walk on it for an hour or two, though."

"What a wretched nuisance. I am sorry," Clare said vexedly.

He made a move to pick her up again.

"I can quite easily hop," she said awkwardly.

"You can, but you'll probably fall flat on your face again." He eyed her sardonically. "Do you object to being carried?"

"Well, no, of course not. But aren't I too heavy?"

"I'll survive." He scooped her up. "Put your arm round my neck, it helps to distribute your weight."

Wishing she had not made a fuss, Clare slipped her arm round his neck. Their faces were very close and she had a wild impulse to lay her cheek against his shoulder.

Jenny met them half-way up the beach, dragging Josh by the scruff of his neck.

"He's only chewed it a bit. I think he's sorry."

"All right, we'll let him off this time," David said. "Run round to the dinghy, will you? There should be some lint in the locker."

Instructing Clare not to let her foot touch the ground, he set her down and searched in his pocket for a clean

handkerchief.

"Grit your teeth. The iodine will sting like hell," he said briefly.

It did. Clare winced and clenched her fists, but when David looked up she contrived to smile, although she had gone rather white.

"Good girl. It's an old-fashioned remedy, but it takes a lot of beating. Have a swig of orange juice."

He filled the beaker and gave it to her. By the time she had drunk it the sting of the iodine had lessened slightly.

"Would you like your jacket on?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes, please. It's gone rather chilly in the last half-hour. I should have changed my swimsuit."

"I think we may as well go home as soon as your foot is fixed up," he said, helping her on with the jacket.

"Good lord, your hands are frozen. Give them to me."

He took her hands in his own warm ones and rubbed them briskly.

"I shouldn't have let you stay in the water so long." His voice held a curious gentleness, as though she were a child to be protected and comforted.

To her chagrin, Clare felt quick tears prick her eyelids. She tried to withdraw her hands, but he held on to them.

"Clare, look at me."

Slowly she raised her face. He was not mocking her now. His expression was grave, and his blue eyes seemed to probe into her mind and heart, stripping away her defences.

Then he bent forward and his mouth brushed hers.

It was the briefest of caresses, but as he let go her hands and stood up she knew with certainty and joy that she loved him.

"Here comes Jenny with the lint," he said quietly.

Ten minutes later the injury had been neatly bound up and the hamper packed. This time Clare submitted with delight to being picked up. Was it her imagination or did

he hold her more closely now? It took all her control to keep her face averted, her hand lax on his shoulder. She longed to look at him, to touch the crisp dark hair at the nape of his neck. But with Jenny trotting beside them it was impossible to give the least sign of her inward feelings.

They reached the dinghy and he deposited her carefully in the stern.

"Comfortable?"

"Yes, thank you."

The words, so trivial in themselves, seemed now to have a deeper significance.

All the way back to the moorings she wanted to shout aloud her happiness. *It's happened. It's happened at last. I'm in love.*

Hilda met them at the garden door, clicking her tongue concernedly at the sight of Clare's bandaged foot.

"Now, what's this?"

"Only a cut, Hilda," David said easily. "How are the decorations going?"

"That Cobble! He's enough to drive me out of my wits," Hilda said tersely. "You've never seen such a mess as he's made. It'll take me a week to clear up. Now I've got a nice hot supper for you, so don't be too long tidying yourselves."

"Perhaps you could give Clare a hand," he suggested.

"No, no. I can manage quite well," Clare insisted.

With Jenny's aid she hobbled upstairs. Alone in her room she could not repress her yearning to say it aloud. I love him. I love David.

She stared at herself in the looking glass. Outwardly she looked just the same but inwardly . . . inwardly there was a world of difference.

Remembering rather belatedly Hilda's injunction not to be long, she reached for her comb and began restoring her wind-tangled hair to order. Her immediate instinct

had been to put on her prettiest dress, but she realised now that she could not do so without exciting comment from Hilda and Jenny. But there was no reason why she should not wear the new cashmere sweater which she had bought in Norwich on their last Saturday shopping trip.

Swiftly she peeled off her swimsuit and rummaged in the chest of drawers for clean underwear.

It had been a long day. Jenny would probably go to bed early, and with Miss Lancaster away, they would be alone. Alone with David. A tremor of excitement ran through her and she fastened her slacks with unsteady fingers.

"Ready, Clare?" Jenny called through the door.

"Not quite. You carry on down. I can manage the stairs by myself."

She slid the sweater out of its cellophane package and pulled it over her head. It was a soft shade of turquoise with the texture of swansdown. She ran a coral lipstick over her lips and touched her wrists and throat with the glass stopper of the perfume flask.

Jenny and David were already at the table when she limped into the dining-room. He rose at once and pulled out her chair.

"How's the foot now? Still painful?"

"No, hardly at all. I'll probably be able to put a plaster on it tomorrow. My skin always heals very quickly."

Hilda had prepared a chicken casserole followed by raspberry trifle, and Clare was faintly surprised to find that she had a good appetite. As usual, they had coffee in the sitting-room and, as she had hoped, it was not long before Jenny began to yawn and knuckle her eyes.

"Time you were in bed, Toots," David said, ruffling the child's hair.

"Oh, not yet, Uncle David. It's quite early."

"Up you go," he said firmly.

"Can I read for a bit?"

He glanced at his watch. "Half an hour, no longer. Don't forget to clean your teeth."

Jenny gathered up the day's collection of shells and stones and kissed them both good night. As the door closed behind her, Clare felt a flutter of apprehension. This was the moment she had been awaiting, and now that it was here her composure seemed to have ebbed away, leaving her as nervous and diffident as a schoolgirl.

"Another cup of coffee?" she asked hurriedly.

"Thanks." He brought his cup over and waited while she filled it. When he offered his cigarette-case she accepted eagerly in the hope that smoking would calm her quivering nerves.

Instead of returning to his usual chair, he sat down on the sofa beside her, one arm stretched along the back so that his finger-tips were almost touching her shoulder.

"Have you enjoyed your day?" he asked.

She shot a quick look at him. Was that a straightforward question or not?

"Yes, very much. It couldn't have been hotter on the Riviera."

"It would certainly have been much more crowded. I was persuaded to go to Nice once. It was worse than Blackpool."

"I can't imagine you basking under an umbrella at a fashionable resort," she said, smiling.

He grinned, that rare engaging grin which made him look so much younger and more approachable.

"Is that a compliment?"

"It was intended to be. I imagine the Riviera being crowded with stout business barons or sleek gigolos."

"Thank you for excluding me from either category," he said politely.

She put her empty cup back on the tray. Her cigarette was almost finished, and she had the odd feeling that he was waiting for her to stub it out. Her fingers shook and

the cigarette end dropped from them on to her lap.

His hand shot out and grabbed it before it could burn her slacks. He flicked away a particle of red-hot ash.

"You seem slightly distraite. What's the trouble?"

"No trouble. I just wasn't concentrating." As if hypnotised, she watched him drop the cigarette in the ash-tray and crush it out.

"Are you trying to avoid the inevitable, Clare?" he asked softly, and at the same moment his arm slid from the sofa and closed round her shoulders. Then his other hand came up and cupped her chin, tilting her face towards him. For a long moment he studied her intently, and this time his face was neither mocking nor tender. His eyes glittered with a light that brought a lump to her throat and the arm about her was tense.

With a spasm of something close to fear she knew that here was a man who, once his iron control snapped, was capable of violent, even savage emotions. He would not be a humble and supplicating lover, treating her gently, grateful for her favours. If she surrendered now, she would be his utterly and completely, body and soul.

"Clare . . ." his voice was husky.

Neither of them heard the footsteps crossing the hall, but a tap at the door made David spring to his feet with a smothered curse.

"Miss Clare, I clean forgot to tell you that this box came for you today."

Hilda stood in the doorway, her round face apologetic, a narrow white box in her hand.

"Oh . . . thank you, Hilda." Clare hoped her voice sounded normal.

"I've been that flustered with Cobble messing up the kitchen that it went right out of my head," Hilda explained, putting the box on the sofa. "If I hadn't chanced to reach up to the top of the dresser for some fresh shelf paper, it would have been there till morning. I put it out

of Cobble's way, you see, in case he was to go and spill some of his paint on it."

"Never mind. I don't expect it's anything important. Good night, Hilda."

"Good night, miss. Good night, Mr. David. Shall I lock the front door now or will you be going out again?"

"Lock it by all means. Good night." His voice was sharp, but Hilda did not appear to notice anything unusual, and, still murmuring regretfully about her forgetfulness, she went out.

As the latch clicked into place David swung round. He was breathing hard, his dark brows drawn together in an angry bar. Catching Clare's eyes, his scowl lightened.

"We seem fated to be interrupted," he said wryly.

"Perhaps I ought to go to bed."

"For Pete's sake!"

"Well, your aunt is away, and in the circumstances —" She made an expressive gesture.

"The devil you will." His glance fell on the box. "Aren't you going to open it?"

"Oh . . . yes, I suppose I should."

He tossed a pocket knife on to her lap and she cut the tape and removed the lid. Inside on a bed of cotton-wool lay an exquisite spray of white gardenias. With an involuntary cry of delight, she lifted it out of the box and sniffed the delicate fragrance.

Then she caught sight of the card tucked among the glossy leaves.

On it, in a sprawling hand, was written: "In the words of the song, 'Moonlight Becomes You'. I shall be back on Friday. Will you dine with me again? Paul."

Laughter curved her mouth. How like him to send flowers all the way from London when he could easily have telephoned the Hall and ordered a posy from his own hot-house to be brought over to her.

"From Mallinson?" Lancaster's tone was clipped.

"Yes. Aren't they beautiful?" She laid them gently back in the box and slipped the card into her pocket.

His face was expressionless and she was totally unprepared for his next remark.

"Do you think you're wise to encourage him?"

"I don't follow you," she said, genuinely puzzled.

He lit another cigarette, forgetting to offer one to her.

"I mean that a man of his type doesn't lavish presents on a woman without expecting something in return."

If he had struck her she would not have been more shocked. For several seconds she stared frozenly at him, scarcely believing her ears. But the harsh set of his mouth confirmed that she had not misheard.

Without pausing to choose her words, she said coldly, "Isn't that rather an unpleasant allegation against a man who is supposed to be your friend?"

"It happens to be true," he replied curtly.

"I don't agree. Paul is a delightful person, not a bit like . . . like that."

He laughed, a short derisive sound quite without mirth.

"Rich men usually are considered delightful by your sex."

She stiffened, her eyes bright with anger.

"Just what are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything. I'm merely warning you – since you appear to be so singularly naïve – that Paul isn't a suitable partner for an idle flirtation. You're likely to burn your fingers. If you realise that and want to take the risk. . . ." He shrugged expressively.

"How dare you!" She sprang up, rigid with indignation. "Of all the disgusting pieces of disloyalty – that certainly takes the prize!"

"Our codes of ethics seem to differ," he said icily. "While you are part of this household, it is my concern to see you don't make a fool of yourself, unintentionally or otherwise."

Clare's mouth curled disdainfully.

"I may be your employee, Mr. Lancaster, but that doesn't give you the right to interfere with my private life. I choose my own friends, and I'm afraid your innuendoes won't alter my feelings for Paul Mallinson."

He exhaled a thin plume of smoke, his eyes running over her in a way that made her fists clench.

"So I was right in my original estimate. You're like the rest of your sex, after all."

"I believe I can take care of myself without your supervision," she said hotly.

"I don't doubt it," he agreed unpleasantly. "Today's events must have been most diverting for you. I suppose in Mallinson's absence you were bored—"

"You are insufferable!"

She was trembling with fury now, angrier than she had ever been in her life.

"Don't worry. I shan't be deceived a second time," he said silkily.

Controlling her temper with a supreme effort, Clare picked up the box of gardenias and moved to the door, only to find him barring her way.

"Please let me pass!" Her voice shook with the pent-up violence of her rage.

"Certainly. But first we have some unfinished business to conclude. I'm afraid I've been a poor substitute for Mallinson up till now. Perhaps it's not too late to improve my technique."

With a swift movement he grabbed her wrists and drew her against him.

"Don't struggle. You can't get away."

"Let me go! Let me go . . . please. . . ." Suddenly she was afraid of him, her voice imploring.

"Perhaps this will teach you to be less confident about taking care of yourself," he said roughly.

For a few seconds she struggled desperately to break

free and then, suddenly, all the fight went out of her and she lay limp and unresisting in his arms. His grip slackened slightly and she thought for an instant that he was going to release her, but with a sound like a groan he bent his head and forced his mouth on hers.

CHAPTER VIII

CLARE switched on the bedside lamp and looked at the clock. Half-past twelve. She lay back on the pillows, brushing her tumbled hair away from her hot face.

Was it really only three hours since she had stumbled upstairs to the sanctuary of her room? Her lips still burned from the ferocity of his kisses, and she felt weak and shaken as if she had come through some tremendous physical ordeal and could scarcely believe that it was over.

Her first reaction had been anger: a searing white-hot anger at herself because at the last moment she had ceased to struggle and capitulated to his superior strength. Then anger had turned to shame as, reluctantly, she acknowledged the wretched truth. Whatever her previous feelings had been, in the moment that his mouth had come down on hers with savage force, she had known a pang of exquisite delight. Even now, remembering how powerless she had been in his vice-like grip, she felt a primitive surge of joy.

And, worst of all, when at last he had let her go, she had not shrunk away from him in scorn and loathing. Had he begged her forgiveness or kissed her again, more gently this time, she would have melted into his arms. Instead he had thrust her away from him and disappeared into the garden, leaving her to come to her senses.

Where was he now? She had not heard his footsteps on the stairs or the creak of his bedroom door. He must be still outside. What was he thinking? She could not even begin to guess. There was no means of knowing how such a scene would affect him, for nothing in his former behaviour had given her a key to tonight's outburst. She had never dreamed that his normally frosty demeanour

concealed such a volcano of passion.

Nor had she guessed that she, too, was capable of such tempestuous feelings. Months ago a man had told her that she had a heart of stone and she had believed him. She knew now that it was not true and never had been. The truth was that no man had ever roused her deepest emotions – until tonight. In David's arms her whole body had trembled with response and for the first time she had glimpsed the heights of ecstasy. How different from Paul's kisses, which had stirred nothing more than affection and a mild pleasure in her.

Her mind still a jumble of confused thoughts, she fell asleep.



David was not at the breakfast-table next morning, but as he frequently went on to the marsh at an early hour and had breakfast when he returned, his absence did not call for any comment.

Clare had woken up in a calmer frame of mind, and told herself that, since last night's events could scarcely be ignored, it was up to him to give the lead for their future behaviour.

She was busy typing in the study – and finding it extremely difficult to concentrate – when she heard him speaking to Hilda in the kitchen, and a moment later he appeared in the doorway carrying his breakfast-tray.

“Good morning. Any post?”

“Yes, three letters.”

He shut the door, set the tray on the window-ledge and took the letters which she handed to him.

Then he said quietly, “Before we deal with these, there is a personal matter which must be discussed.”

Clare felt a rush of colour flood her cheeks, but she said nothing.

“First I must apologise for what happened last night.”

He was facing the window with his back to her so that she could not see his expression, but his voice sounded strained.

"There is very little excuse for my behaviour," he went on, "and I've no doubt you've been considering giving me notice. It would be a perfectly natural course of action in the circumstances. However, although I have no right to do so, I would like to ask you to reconsider your decision. As you know, I have already had one secretary, and if you leave it will be some time before I can replace you, which means that the book will be delayed. I am anxious to get it away by the end of September at the latest, and for that reason I am asking you to stay. I can assure you that last night's incident will not happen again."

Clare heard him out in stunned silence. The crux of what he had said was his conviction that she was on the point of handing in her notice, and she had not even considered doing so.

When she made no reply for several minutes, he turned and said, "Am I to take it that you cannot accept my apology?"

"Oh, no. I mean, I do accept it," Clare said hastily.

"That is more than I deserve. Thank you. I suggest that we both forget the whole thing. Now, if you're ready, I'll answer these letters."

*

It was not until late afternoon that Clare had an opportunity to think the matter over. Upon reflection she realised that it was precisely how he might have been expected to behave. Nothing must be allowed to interfere with his work.

Did he honestly believe that they could both forget what had happened? Perhaps *he* could. But could she?

Did she want to forget it?

I'm out of my depth, she thought with a sigh.

The next three days were uneventful. Miss Lancaster returned from Scotland; Paul returned from London and he and Clare had dinner together at a hotel along the coast, but she was not in the mood for his banter and, on the pretext of a headache, she asked him to take her home early.

On the fourth afternoon she was working with David in the study when there was a commotion in the hall.

"Uncle David! Something awful has happened. I've lost Josh!"

Jenny burst into the room like a small whirlwind, her face pale with distress.

"Lost him? Where?"

"We were playing Indians in the woods and he disappeared. We called and called, but he didn't come. I'm sure something dreadful has happened to him?" Her mouth trembled and two large tears trailed down her cheeks.

"Take it easy, chicken." Lancaster drew her into the circle of his arm. "Now, tell me exactly what happened."

Jenny gulped and fumbled for a handkerchief.

"Have this." He gave her his. "Now, start from the beginning."

"Well . . ." Jenny blew her nose and drew a long, shaky breath. "Mrs. Harker gave us a picnic tea, and we left Josh to guard it by the big beech tree, you know, the one you carved your name on when you were a little boy. When we came back to eat it he wasn't there, but I thought he'd just gone investigating, the way he often does. We went on playing for a while, and then Annabel cut her leg on some barbed wire, and it was bleeding a lot, so Tod said she must go home. Josh hadn't come back, so we hunted everywhere for him and then Tod said perhaps he had got bored and come home. But he isn't in the

garden and Hilda hasn't seen him, so he must be lost, poor angel."

"Don't cry, Jenny-wren," David said hastily, as her freckled face puckered up again. "I expect he's exploring and will come back in his own good time. It must have been pretty dull for him guarding the food. Maybe he heard a rat and chased it. Look, if he isn't back by dinner-time, I'll go out and look for him; but I'm pretty sure he'll come home in time for his own supper, the old scoundrel."

"Do you really think so?" Jenny asked hopefully.

"He'll turn up," her uncle assured her cheerfully. "Now run along and wash your face."

When she had gone, he frowned and rubbed his jaw thoughtfully.

"It's not like Josh to go off on his own for any length of time," he said to Clare.

"I hope to goodness he does turn up soon," she said. "Jenny loves him so much, she'll be in a terrible flap if he isn't back by her bed-time."

"Yes, I'm afraid she will."

By dinner-time there was still no sign of the dog. Jenny scarcely touched the welsh rarebit which was normally one of her favourite dishes, and although the older members of the household concealed their growing concern, conversation was forced.

At half-past eight David said, "It looks as if he's got himself stuck in a burrow. I'll have a scout round. He's doubtless howling for his tea, so it shouldn't be difficult to track him down."

"Let me come too, Uncle David," Jenny pleaded.

"You'd better stay here in case he turns up," David answered.

"Perhaps Clare wouldn't mind going with you. Two of you can cover a larger area," Miss Lancaster suggested.

"Yes, I'd be glad to help," Clare said readily.

"I should put an old skirt on. The woods are full of

brambles. We'll take the car as far as the stile," David advised.

"I'll run up and change. I won't be two minutes."

David was already at the wheel when she ran round to the garage. He was fitting a new battery in a powerful torch.

"Just in case we're still looking by dusk," he explained.

"What do you think can have happened to him?" Clare asked as they turned out of the gate.

"I'm afraid he may have got caught in an old gin-trap."

"Oh no!"

Years ago she and Hal had found a dog caught in one of the cruel spring traps, and she remembered the ghastly condition of its captured leg. They had carried it home, but their father had taken one look at the injury and said brusquely that it would be kinder to put the animal out of its misery. The thought of Josh struggling to free himself from a gin trap was horrible.

"We really need about six people for this job," David said as they climbed the stile. "The wood is roughly rectangular and stretches for about a quarter of a mile, so if you can cover the left-hand side, I'll take the right. There's a ditch at the far end. Whoever gets through first had better wait for the other."

Half an hour later Clare scrambled through a bank of bracken and found herself at the edge of the wood. There had been no sign of Josh, although she had paused every few yards to listen for a muffled whimper. The only signs had been the rustle of the branches and once or twice she had heard David calling in the distance.

If the dog was caught in a trap it was more than likely that he was too exhausted to respond to their calls, in which case they could scour the countryside all night without finding him.

She looked along the dyke, and at that moment David

emerged from his end of the wood.

"Not a sign," he shouted, coming towards her.

"What's over there?" Clare asked, pointing across the barley field on the other side of the ditch.

"Those bushes, you mean? That's an old quarry. We might as well take a look, I suppose. Can you jump the ditch?"

She looked doubtfully at the sluggish stream, which was about four feet wide. The far bank looked an insecure landing-place, and she had no desire to plunge knee-deep in slime.

"Hold on. I'll go over first and catch you if you slip," he said.

He sprang across, and, as Clare had feared, the bank crumbled dangerously under his weight.

"Come on, I won't let you fall in." He held out his hands encouragingly.

Gritting her teeth and fully expecting to land in the water, she launched herself across the ditch. Her feet landed on the very edge of the bank, which promptly gave way, but before she could overbalance David had grabbed her arms and heaved her to safety.

"Just made it! Are you all right?"

"Yes, I think so." She drew a long breath of relief. "My skirt is too narrow for these gymnastics."

He was still holding her by the arms and she looked up at him. For a long moment they gazed into each other's eyes.

Suddenly he stiffened. "Listen!"

A faint cry echoed across the field.

"That's Josh all right. He must be in the quarry. Come on!"

He began to run round the edge of the barley. Clare followed, stumbling over the rough earth. A thistle scratched her leg, but she did not feel it. She was hardly conscious of moving at all.

All she knew was that David had looked at her with unmistakable longing.

They scrambled through a hedge and up a slope to the scrub surrounding the quarry.

"Watch your step, it's a sheer drop on this side," he warned. "There he is. Look, by those gorse bushes. I'm going down. You stay here."

"It's much too steep," Clare cried, but he was already lowering himself over the edge.

Terrified that he would fall, she watched him inch his way down the rock face, which seemed, from above, to offer dangerously few footholds. It seemed an age before he reached the floor of the quarry. By now it was growing dusk and she could just make out the dog's toffee-coloured coat in the shadow of the gorse.

"He's torn his hind leg," David shouted up presently. "I shall need help to get him up. There's a farm just over the ridge. Tell them what has happened and ask them to bring a rope."

An hour later Clare sat in the back of the farmer's Land Rover with Josh's head on her lap.

She fondled his silky ears. "Poor old boy! Never mind, the vet is coming to dress your cuts, and your leg will be as good as new in a little while."

Josh licked her hand gratefully, rolling his eyes as if to apologise for the trouble he had caused.

With the aid of the farmer and his son they had managed to rescue him from the quarry, and now that the deep gash on his flank had been washed and temporarily bandaged, he seemed to have survived his ordeal in remarkably good spirits.

How he had come to be in the quarry was a mystery. The farmer suggested that he might have been chasing a hare and been unable to swerve aside at the last moment, an accident which had befallen one of the farm puppies some years back.

Miss Lancaster was waiting at the gate when they reached home.

"I thought you were never coming," she explained. "Jenny's been crying herself sick for the past hour. She's just fallen asleep, completely worn out, poor child."

"All is well," David said. "We found him in the old quarry. He's damaged a leg, but it will mend with care."

They were carrying the dog into the house on an improvised stretcher when Jenny wandered out of the sitting-room, rubbing her eyes sleepily. As soon as she saw Josh she gave a cry of joy and flew to his side, her tear-stained face radiant with relief.

When the excitement had finally subsided and Hilda had produced a tempting dish of liver and greaves which Josh ate with unimpaired appetite, David remembered that he had left the car by the stile.

"Can't you leave it there, just for tonight?" Miss Lancaster suggested.

He shook his head. "I shall have Constable Potter summoning me for obstruction," he said with a weary grin. "Come on, Jenny, it's time you were in bed."

"Couldn't I have Josh in my room just for tonight?" she begged.

"He'd be better down here. I should think he'll sleep the clock round," David said firmly.

"You must be tired, dear," Miss Lancaster said when he had gone to fetch the car. "We won't wait for David."

Clare could hardly protest that she was not at all tired and wanted very much to wait for David, so she followed them upstairs and said good night. She had half decided to slip down again, but with her hand on the door-knob she realised that Miss Lancaster would be bound to hear their voices.

Reluctantly she undressed and cleaned her teeth. She was just climbing into bed when she heard the car return. With quickened heartbeats she listened for his footsteps

on the stairs. The minutes passed and there was still no sound.

Was he waiting for her? What an idiot she had been to undress.

At last she heard him come up and the soft click of his bedroom door closing.

Slowly she slid her feet between the cool sheets and lay down. So this was the singing of the heart . . . the elusive rapture of love. How blind she had been not to recognise it before.



Clare woke early and was already dressed when Hilda brought her cup of tea.

"Jenny's still asleep. I reckon it will do her good to have a lie in after yesterday," she said.

"Yes, it will. Thank you, Hilda. How is Josh this morning?"

"Fidgety. He won't take kindly to being bandaged," Hilda said. "Still, it will teach him not to go gallivanting, the silly creature."

Clare made her bed and ran downstairs, pausing a moment at the dining-room door in a sudden flurry of shyness. As usual David was reading *The Times*.

"Good morning."

"Good morning."

To her surprise he scarcely glanced up from the leading article he was reading.

Helping herself to kedgeriee, Clare wondered if he, too, felt shy. She waited for him to finish the article and put the paper aside, but instead he turned to the sports page and continued to read. She stifled a small pang of irritation. Surely for once the morning ritual could be waived.

Finishing his coffee, he folded the newspaper.

"The vet will be here at nine-thirty, so there's not much point in starting work until he's fixed up Josh."

"No, I suppose not." Now that he was looking at her she found herself ridiculously tongue-tied.

He pushed back his chair, and for a glorious moment she thought he was going to come round the table and take her in his arms, affirming with his lips all that his eyes had said last night by the ditch.

But to her astonishment he picked up his letters and left the room.

She was so staggered by this that she was still gazing at the door when Hilda slid back the serving-hatch and asked if she would like some more coffee.

"No, thank you, Hilda. I've finished now."

Automatically she began to stack the dishes on the trolley.

"There's no call for you to do that, Miss Clare," Hilda said, bustling in. "You've enough to do without helping me. Now, that Miss Bunberry, she never raised a finger. Not that I expect it, mind, but it was her attitude, if you take my meaning. And faddy – my word! If there's one thing I can't abide, it's a plate with leavings on it. I don't pretend to be a fancy cook, but there's no call to sniff at good plain food like she did."

"I wish I could cook as well as you do," Clare said sincerely. "I'm afraid I used to cook with a tin-opener in London."

Hilda shook her head disapprovingly. She disdained all tinned foodstuffs, and marvelled that Jenny's American playmates were so boisterously healthy when they lived on a canned and refrigerated diet.

When the table was cleared, Clare went up to dust her room. It was silly to be upset by David's abrupt departure from the breakfast table. After all, Hilda might have popped her head through the hatch at any moment.

It was not until mid-morning, when the veterinary

surgeon had been and gone and David was settling down to dictation, that she knew that once again he was adopting his policy of ignoring past actions. Whatever his eyes had said to her last night, this morning they were as coldly blue as the sea.

CHAPTER IX

A FORTNIGHT before the gala dance at the Hall, Clare met Penny Conyers in the village post office.

"I believe you work too hard," she said, noticing how pinched and wan the younger girl looked.

Penny shrugged her thin shoulders.

"I am a bit tired," she admitted. "It's been a rushed week. Mrs. Tubbs, our daily woman, is ill, so I've had to do everything myself, and there was the Sunday-school outing on Tuesday, which always needs a good deal of organisation, and I spent Wednesday making jam from our raspberry crop."

"Do you like housekeeping?" Clare asked when they had made their purchases and were walking across the green together.

"Yes, I don't mind it," said Penny. "Of course our house is really much too big for two people, and the kitchen is terribly antiquated. If we had a modern stove and an electric boiler it would make things easier, but I suppose we're lucky to have main water at all. The Rector's wife at Greenstaithe has to manage with a pump and oil lamps, and she has four children. Are you in a hurry or have you time for a cup of coffee?"

"I should love one," Clare said.

Although Penny evidently saw nothing unusual in keeping house for her father and shouldering a great deal of the parish work, Clare could not help feeling that it was wrong for a girl of her age to bear so much responsibility.

Following the afternoon of the fête when she had first become concerned about Penny, she had asked Miss Lancaster why the girl was so quiet and reserved.

Miss Lancaster said that in her opinion Penny's painful shyness sprang from the treatment she had received from her father's cousin, who had kept house for him until his daughter was old enough to take over the reins. Margaret Conyers had been one of those soured and narrow-minded women who contrive to cast a blight on everyone within their orbit, and instead of giving the motherless child affection and encouragement, she had been for ever criticising and punishing her.

"But why did Mr. Conyers allow it?" Clare protested.

"I don't think he realised what a miserable creature Margaret was," Miss Lancaster explained. "She ran the house very efficiently and was careful to curb her acid tongue when he was within earshot. Penny was a particularly sensitive child, and Margaret succeeded in giving her a hopeless inferiority complex. Fortunately she was called away to minister to some other unfortunate relatives when Penny was about sixteen, and I dare say she found herself more comfortably situated with them because she didn't come back."

Now, sitting in the Vicarage kitchen, watching Penny prepare coffee, Clare wished there was something she could do to help her overcome the deep-rooted habit of self-effacement.

"Are you going to the ball?" she asked.

Penny nodded, but she did not seem very enthusiastic.

"What are you going to wear?" Clare enquired. (Paul had abandoned his fleeting idea about fancy dress.)

"My blue silk, I suppose. I haven't another long dress, and it hardly seems worth buying a new one just for one evening."

"No, they are expensive," Clare agreed. "What is the blue silk like?"

"I'll show it to you," Penny said. "I thought of altering the neck. Perhaps you could advise me what to do with it. You always have such nice clothes." She glanced shyly

at Clare's turquoise linen dress with its broad belt of cinnamon suède.

"Yes, of course. I love fiddling about with clothes," Clare said readily.

Penny went upstairs and came down with a dress of electric blue silk over her arm. She held it up against herself and Clare had to repress a grimace of dismay. Not only was the shade of blue too harsh for the girl's soft colouring, but the style was years out of date and much too fussy for her age.

"You know, white is really the thing for you," she said thoughtfully. "Look, don't be offended with me, but I don't think this dress is quite right for a ball. Have you thought of making one? It wouldn't cost half as much as buying one, and I'd love to help you run it up if you haven't much time to spare."

"Would you really?" Penny said with a flash of eagerness. Then she bit her lip and said reluctantly, "I don't really *need* a new dress. I've only worn this one four or five times."

"How much money could you spare?" Clare said briskly. She was determined that Penny should not go to the ball in that hideous blue silk if she could help it.

"Well, I've got six pounds saved up, but I'm not sure —"

"Good heavens, you could have a really gorgeous frock for half that amount," Clare said hastily. "Cotton is frightfully cheap, and you could get a long dress out of four yards."

"But where could I get the material?" Penny said.

Clare hesitated a moment and then she leaned forward and said persuasively, "Would you trust me to get it for you? You know we go over to Norwich every Saturday, so I could get the fabric this week-end and then we'd have ten days to make it up. Have you got a pencil? I'll show you what I think would suit you. Something very simple with just a touch of blue the exact shade of your

eyes. Here, like this. . . .”

She hunted in her bag for a scrap of paper and, seizing the pencil which Penny handed to her, made a rapid sketch.

“There! How about that?”

Penny leaned over her shoulder and studied the hurried drawing.

“But surely it would cost a fortune to make a dress like that,” she said uncertainly.

“No, it wouldn’t. I used to share a flat with a mannequin, and she showed me several dodges for making off-the-peg clothes look like models. The same things apply to home-made efforts. If you’ll leave it to me, I’ll make you a dress which will look like a million dollars and cost practically nothing. After all, it is a special occasion!”

It took some time to convince Penny that the plan was not unjustifiably extravagant, but finally Clare won her round. Penny insisted on fetching four pounds from her savings tin, and as it was clear that she was still uneasy, Clare took the money and said good-bye before she could change her mind.

During the afternoon Paul rang up to ask if she would care to go for a drive that evening and, having checked that David would not need her after tea, she accepted the invitation and arranged to meet Paul at the top of the lane at six o’clock.

During tea David said he was taking Jenny out in the dinghy for an hour and would she care to join them?

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’m going out,” she said.

“With Paul?” said Jenny.

“Yes. We’re driving over to some inn he has discovered,” Clare said.

“Well, you’ll probably enjoy that more than paddling around in the tub,” David remarked. She suspected that he was jibing at her, for she knew now that he frowned on her friendship with Paul, and would never believe that

she would have much preferred to spend the evening sailing.

Lately she had despaired of establishing a friendship with him, for although the scene on the night Paul had sent her the box of gardenias and the incident by the ditch when they were searching for Josh had proved that he was not completely indifferent to her presence, she had no reason to suppose that he felt anything more than an unwilling physical attraction towards her.

So it was with troubled thoughts that she went to meet Paul, and although, as always, she soon responded to his gaiety, the underlying sense of disquiet remained.

They drove inland to a quiet inn by a river, and it was very pleasant sitting on the lawn at the back of the building, watching a family of swans gliding beneath the willows.

Some distance away from them another couple were sitting, their hands clasped, their heads close together. Now and then the girl would laugh at something the man had said, and once Clare saw him lean closer and kiss her cheek. They were probably engaged, and later, when it was dark, they would stroll home together, their arms about each other, planning the future.

I wonder if I shall ever be like that, Clare thought rather forlornly. Sometimes she had the feeling that time was flying by and she was being left behind, cut off from the things that other girls enjoyed. Twenty-six was not old, of course, but youth did not last for ever and she seemed to have so little to show for her life. Was it possible that she was destined to remain single, never to have a home of her own and children? It seemed a bleak prospect. Perhaps I shall end up by being one of those perfect secretaries, she thought wryly. Grey-haired and a trifle stout and absolutely indispensable to some harassed businessman. Oh dear, I do hope not.

"You had a most curious expression on your face just

then," Paul said, smiling at her. "What were you thinking about?"

Clare sipped her Cinzano and laughed. "I was imagining myself being presented with a chiming clock and a silver-mounted biscuit-barrel after thirty years of faithful service," she said.

"What an extraordinary idea!" He raised his eyebrows in amazement. "Faithful service to whom?"

"Oh, to an M.P. or a stockbroker, I should think."

"You don't regard this secretarial business as a life's work, do you?"

"I didn't until lately. But I was just thinking that perhaps it might be," she admitted.

"Good lord, what a prospect! That's what comes of burying yourself in the country. You'll be rustling up the aisle in white satin and what-have-you long before the biscuit-barrel stage."

"I don't know, not everyone gets married," she said reasonably. "Take Mr. Lancaster, for instance. I shouldn't think he will."

"Oh, David's the exception to the rule. He's let one spell of bad luck mess up his whole life, poor devil. I suppose you know about that?"

"No."

"He was jilted," Paul said briefly.

"But why?" Clare asked in astonishment.

He gave her a rather odd look and she said hastily, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked that. It's none of my business."

"It's no secret," Paul said. "He was engaged to a girl a few years ago, and she found somebody richer and threw him over at the last moment. He happened to be in hospital at the time, pretty badly knocked up, which made it a bit harder to take."

"How frightfully cruel! I had no idea."

"Most people have forgotten about it – except David,

of course. That's why he isn't exactly enthusiastic about your charming sex."

"No. I can understand that now," Clare said softly. The casual information had clarified many things about her employer which had mystified her. Poor David. No wonder he mistrusted women.

"Was she a good-looking girl, do you know?" she asked.

"Yes, an absolute stunner, I believe. I never met her, but from all accounts she was also a thorough-going little tramp."

That accounted for David's contempt for beauty. When he had said of Andrea Ashley that beauty was only skin deep he had been thinking of the girl who had treated him so heartlessly. Clare was so immersed in consideration of the new light which Paul had thrown on the complexities of David's character that when he said, "Time we were going," she realised with a start that it was already dusk.

Wondering if he suspected her of being unduly interested in her employer's past history, she made an effort to be lively and talkative on the return drive.

"The village seems to be buzzing with excitement about the ball," she said. "It must make a tremendous amount of work for your staff."

"Oh, they like it," he said. "I'm lucky enough to have some of the old school with me, none of your clock-watchers who would much rather be doing piece-work in a factory. Not that you can blame 'em, of course. If I'd had the misfortune to be born one of the world's workers I'd be in a factory myself. Lord knows what I should do if I lost Henderson and Mrs. Craig. Sell up, probably. No use keeping on a great barn of a house without staff."

He hooted at a dog which was standing in the centre of the road outside a farm gate.

"I remember when I was a kid we had a vegetable

maid called Polly. She used to be up at five staggering about with buckets of coal, and the rest of the day she spent cutting up vegetables. Her hands were a shocking sight. She got a few shillings a week and her keep, which was good going in those days, poor little wretch. In the end she was sent packing because of some trouble with one of the village lads. I don't know what happened to her after that, but if Polly had been born in 1950 instead of 1930 she would have a job in a shop or a factory with good wages and plenty of time off."

"I suppose in the old days I should have been a children's governess or a companion," Clare said. "At any rate, I shouldn't have been spending my evenings with the squire," she added teasingly.

"You weren't born in the early thirties," he reminded her. "The great change began in those ten years."

At the top of the lane he stopped the car.

"I suppose I can't lure you up to the house for a night-cap?"

She shook her head. "No, but thank you for the drive."

"It's not late. Don't you approve of visiting bachelor establishments, or do you still suspect me of dishonourable intentions?"

"Of course not," she said honestly, "but you know what the village is. I expect they would love a nice juicy piece of gossip about you."

He threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"Bless you, my sweet. You're the first woman who has ever been concerned about preserving *my* reputation, but I'm afraid it's a lost cause."

"Why do you make yourself out to be such a black-guard?" she asked.

"Don't you believe I am?"

"No, I don't," she said firmly. "I think you just pretend to be one."

"I'm afraid there are not many people who share your opinion."

"They probably don't know you very well."

"Do you?"

"I think so. Well, enough to trust you."

He put his hand over hers and pressed it. "You know, you have a peculiar effect on me," he said softly. "I don't quite know what to make of it. Would it shatter your illusions if I kissed you good night?"

Before she could reply he had bent his head and kissed her lightly on the mouth.

"That's out of character, too," he said with a grin. "I think you'd better run indoors before I'm tempted to challenge your good opinion."



On Saturday morning David drove them into Norwich, and Clare went in search of the materials for Penny's ball dress. She bought a length of blue and white flowered cotton. This left her just over ten shillings of Penny's money, so she added some of her own money to the budget and chose some luxurious French satin.

She was passing a shoe shop on her way to meet the others for lunch when she noticed a pair of blue velvet slippers in the window and, on impulse, she went inside and bought them, hoping she had guessed Penny's size correctly.

"What intriguing parcels," Miss Lancaster commented when she arrived at the restaurant and slipped into the chair which David held for her.

"I'm helping Penny to make a dress for the ball," Clare explained. "The one she has is not a bit becoming, and I managed to persuade her that she ought to have something really glamorous for a change."

"I didn't know women helped each other to achieve

that extremely overrated condition," David said with arched brows.

"It depends on the women," Clare replied, giving him a straight look. "And even if you don't approve of glamour, I think you'll admit that Penny has the makings of a very pretty girl."

"Certainly," he agreed smoothly. "I was merely wondering whether paint and powder and an elaborate get-up were necessarily improvements."

"I have not the least intention of encouraging her to use paint and powder, as you call it," Clare said crisply. "And if you think her existing clothes are becoming, you can't have very much appreciation of design."

He made no reply to this, and she wondered if she had been too outspoken.

"I entirely agree with you," Miss Lancaster said decidedly. "The poor child hasn't a decent rag to her back. It's very thoughtful of you to help her, Clare. You have excellent taste, my dear, and I'm sure you'll make her look very nice."

"Miss Bunberry didn't use face powder, and you said she had a face like a boiled turnip, Uncle David," Jenny remarked.

David gave his niece a chilling glance and Miss Lancaster hastily raised her napkin to her lips to hide a smile.

"I shall use powder as soon as I'm old enough," Jenny said firmly. "And silver nail varnish. Did you notice that girl who served you in the library this morning, Aunt Leo? Her nails were miles long and gorgeously glittery. I shall have mine like that as soon as I'm eighteen."

"Not if you're staying in my house," David said sternly. "Can't stand the sight of 'em."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. If I'd known you felt like that I would have stopped using nail varnish for the time being," Clare said innocently. Her nails were painted a glossy coral.

David glanced at them and then at her. She managed to keep a straight face.

A slight flush coloured his tanned cheeks, and she longed to put her hand on his arm and say, "I was only teasing. Why do you have to be so gruff?" But she didn't dare and the moment passed.

That evening, while the rest of the household was watching television, Clare spread a dust-sheet on the kitchen table and cut out Penny's dress. She had chosen a very simple pattern with a frilled neckline and little puff sleeves, knowing that Penny would not be able to carry off anything too sophisticated.

Soon after nine David came through the kitchen to take Josh for a run. He glanced at the material on the table but made no remark. Half an hour later he returned and gave the dog its nightly biscuit and fresh drinking water.

Clare was bending over the table, unpinning the cut fabric from the pieces of paper pattern. She had washed her hair during the afternoon and it curled in soft tendrils on her forehead.

"Have you done much dressmaking?" David asked, watching her work.

She glanced up. "I used to make most of my own clothes when I first started work and didn't earn very much. It's not difficult."

He touched the pretty cotton. The fragile substance seemed to emphasise the strength and masculinity of his well-shaped brown hands.

"Do you like this colour?" she asked.

"Yes, I like blue. There's a flower that shade called spring squill. It isn't common along this coast. They used to make cough cure from it years ago."

"You mean *Scilla verna*?" she said, smiling.

"How did you know that?"

"You mentioned it in the chapter on swamp plants,"

she said.

"You must have a very retentive memory."

"Some of the names are so pretty," she said. "Like lamb's lettuce and tamarisk and eyebright."

"Yes, they are. I didn't realise you were interested."

"I wasn't at first," she admitted. "Then I went for a walk on the marsh and noticed a spiky yellow flower which I hadn't seen before, and I looked it up in one of your text-books and found it was sea-purslane. After that I began to learn the names of all the plants on the marsh."

He was silent for a while and then he said, "I'm afraid you thought me rather stuffy at lunch-time – about all this," he indicated the blue material.

"Yes," she said gravely. "I did."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I daresay I am a good deal behind the times in some respects."

She bent her head to hide the understanding in her eyes. He has turned his face from everything that could remind him that women are desirable, she thought. He must have loved that girl very much for the bitterness to have lasted all these years.



On Monday evening Clare took the dress to the Vicarage for its first fitting.

"Did you have enough money?" Penny asked anxiously.

"Here's your sixpence change," Clare said. She felt that in this case a white lie was justified.

When Penny had taken off her blouse and skirt, revealing a shabby but spotlessly clean slip, Clare helped her into the dress which she had tacked together the day before.

"H'm, the waistline needs raising a little. Where did I put the pins? That's better. Now turn round and let me

see if the back hangs properly.”

“Oh, how pretty!” Penny exclaimed with childish pleasure as she revolved slowly.

“Yes, it’s fortunate that these simple Edwardian styles are fashionable at the moment,” said Clare.

“By the way, I’ve got a small present for you.” She nodded towards the oblong box which she had put on a chair.

“A present! Oh, what is it?” Penny said excitedly.

“Open it and see.”

“Oh, Clare, they’re lovely, but I couldn’t possibly accept them. They must have cost a fortune.” She gazed at the velvet slippers longingly.

“In that case I shall have to give them away,” Clare said carelessly. “Your feet are much smaller than mine. At least they look it. Try them to see if they fit.”

Penny slipped off her everyday shoes and slid her feet into the dancing slippers.

“Why, yes, they fit perfectly.” Her face clouded. “But really I can’t—”

“Oh yes, you can. If you don’t I shan’t help you finish the dress, and think what a waste of money that will be,” Clare pointed out.

“Well . . . oh, they are pretty. I don’t believe I can resist them. Thank you very much, Clare. I can’t think why you should be so kind to me.”

“Nonsense,” Clare said briskly. “Now, if you’ll take the dress off, I’ll run it up on your machine. Have you got an evening-bag? Because if not I thought we might make one out of the odd pieces of material that are left over. You can pin a spray of forget-me-nots or scabious to the flap. It will be the perfect finishing touch.”

Penny had just finished dressing when there was a rap at the front door and someone called “Anyone in?”

“It’s Paul,” Penny said, looking startled. “What on earth can he want?”

"To see your father, perhaps," Clare suggested.

Penny smoothed her rumpled hair and hurried out. A moment later she returned with Paul beside her.

"Hallo. I was told you were here. I wondered if you'd like a run up the coast. Some friends of mine are giving a party, and I said I'd look in," he said to Clare.

"I'm sorry, I can't, Paul. We're busy dressmaking."

"Can't you leave it till tomorrow?" he asked.

"No. It's rather important. Besides, I'm not dressed. Thank you for asking me."

Penny was picking up some pins which had dropped on the floor and Clare gave Paul a look meaning, "How about asking her?"

He raised one eyebrow and shook his head.

"Well, if I really can't persuade you to come, I'll be off. Sorry to have burst in like this."

He said goodnight and departed.

"You should have gone," Penny said when the front door had slammed behind him. "I could have done those seams."

"I didn't particularly want to go," Clare replied. She noticed that Penny's colour had risen, and as she replaced the pins in their tin her hand trembled slightly.

She's in love with him, Clare thought. Or if not actually in love, she has a tremendous "crush" on him. Poor child, she might as well reach for a star. It's fairly natural, of course. He's just the type of man to appeal to a girl of her age. Or could it have been shyness which had that effect on her? No, I'm sure it was something more.

By the end of the week Clare had finished the dress and made a small pochette to go with it. She invited Miss Lancaster to a preview, and the old lady pronounced the result charming.

"I feel like Cinderella," Penny said, parading in front of the pier-glass.

"I think it would be a good plan if I came over in the

afternoon and helped you do your hair and face," Clare suggested. "You wouldn't mind, would you, Miss Lancaster?"

"Not at all. What are you going to wear, dear?"

"I don't know yet," Clare said. "I looked round the shops last Saturday, but couldn't see anything I liked. I shall try again tomorrow, if we go over. I have got a reasonably presentable dress, but I feel like being wildly extravagant and buying something special. I've spent very little money since I've been here, so it wouldn't break the bank."

"Well, I shall wear my black lace," Miss Lancaster said. "It's nearly fifteen years old, but at my age fashion isn't important."



On Sunday afternoon Clare met Paul on the foreshore.

"Did you have a good time at the party?" she asked.

"There was an ample supply of gin and blondes," he said.

"Then perhaps it was just as well that I didn't go with you," she answered, amused at his tone which she guessed was intended to nettle her.

"Sorry. That was pure chagrin," he said quickly. "As a matter of fact, I didn't enjoy it at all. I seem to be losing my taste for that sort of thing."

"Why did you make that odd face when I hinted that you should ask Penny?" she said.

"Good lord, it wasn't her sort of party," he said.

"And if it had been, would you have asked her then?"

"It wouldn't have occurred to me. Penny's just a kid."

You may change your mind about that when you see her at the ball, Clare thought.

"Hallo, here comes David," Paul said.

She turned and saw him striding towards them, a bath-

ing towel slung over his shoulder.

He would have passed them with a nod of acknowledgment had she not stepped forward and said, "Are you going swimming? Could I come with you?"

Afterwards she was not clear what had prompted her to do such a thing. Both he and Paul had looked noticeably puzzled, but before he could refuse she had said swiftly, "I'll run back to the house and get my things. I won't be a minute."

When she returned Paul had gone and David was idly tossing pebbles into the water. The tide was up and they sailed as far as the point and then walked round to the beach. Neither of them had spoken a word.

It was not until they had had their swim, dried and changed, and were walking back to the dinghy, that Clare broke the silence by saying, "I hope you didn't mind my coming."

"Why should I?"

"You might have wanted to be alone."

"Couldn't you rely on me to tell you if that was the case?" he enquired with a glint of humour in his eyes.

She laughed. "Yes. At least you don't prevaricate for politeness' sake."

"At least . . . ?" he asked with a touch of irony. "Do you find my character leaves a great deal to be desired in other respects?"

She flushed. "I didn't mean it to sound like that."

He laughed and helped her into the boat.

"I also have a very thick skin," he said dryly.

Suddenly they were both laughing.

The companionable atmosphere lasted until they returned to the house.

"Would you like some coffee?" Clare suggested.

"Good idea." He followed her into the kitchen and leant against the dresser while she filled the percolator and put out cups and saucers. She was very conscious of

the intimacy of the scene, and looking up she saw that he was watching her as if he, too, felt the sudden warmth and harmony between them. Then, for no apparent reason, the warmth died from his eyes and the lines of his face hardened. The mood was lost; he had deliberately killed it.

Clare turned back to the stove to hide her despair. There was no doubting that he had felt the cordiality of the atmosphere; but the feeling had not lasted. He had not wanted it to last.

CHAPTER X

ON the afternoon of the ball, Clare cycled over to the Vicarage. Penny was waiting for her at the gate, her eyes bright with excitement.

"Now the first thing is to set your hair, and then I'll give you a manicure," Clare said as they went indoors.

"I hope I shan't look a complete idiot," Penny said, suddenly doubtful.

"Of course you won't. You'll look lovely."

"I wish I had your confidence," Penny murmured wistfully. "You're never flustered or clumsy."

Little do you know, my girl, Clare thought dryly.

When she had washed and set the younger girl's hair they went into the garden.

"As soon as I've done your nails, I'll make a cup of tea," Clare said. "Which colour polish do you like best?"

Penny gazed dubiously at the row of little bottles that Clare had brought with her.

"I don't think I had better wear anything *too* bright," she said uncertainly.

"No, I agree. It wouldn't suit you. How about this deep pink shade?" Clare suggested.

"Perhaps the colourless varnish would be best."

"Now look here, Penny, tonight you're going to be really glamorous if I have to bludgeon you into it," Clare told her firmly. "You have very pretty hands. There's no earthly reason why you shouldn't make the best of yourself for once. Anyone would think pink nail varnish was immoral."

"It isn't that," Penny said awkwardly. "I do appreciate your help, really I do. But I've never worn make-up and nail varnish and smart clothes, and I don't want people to

laugh at me.”

“They won’t laugh, you little coot. They’ll be much too busy admiring you. Now don’t argue. I wouldn’t have helped you to make the dress if I had thought you were going to shilly-shally over the finishing touches.”

After that Penny submitted meekly to Clare’s ministrations. Inwardly she longed to arrive at the ball looking radiant and soignée, and for days she had dreamed of the dawning admiration in Paul’s eyes when he saw her in the white dress. But it was just a dream, a heavenly dream that couldn’t possibly come true. In spite of all Clare’s encouragement her confidence fluctuated so that at times she wished she was not going to the ball at all, or else going in her old blue silk in which she felt her normal unobtrusive self.

At four o’clock the girls laid the tea-table and knocked on the door of the study where the Vicar was preparing his sermon for the following Sunday.

“Hallo, what’s this?” he said, smiling at his daughter’s chiffon-swathed head as he joined them.

“Clare has been doing my hair. Look, do you like my nails?” Penny spread out her rosy finger-tips.

“Very pretty, my dear. I can see I am going to escort two beauties this evening. What time have we to be there?”

“You must be ready by quarter to eight, Father. I’ve put out your black suit and cleaned your shoes.”

“Ah, that reminds me, I have something for you,” he said, producing a small tissue-paper package from his breast pocket.

Penny eagerly unwrapped the tissue-paper and held up a single strand of pearls.

“Oh, Father, they’re lovely!” She jumped up from her place and kissed his lined cheek.

“Caroline wore them on our wedding-day,” Mr. Conyers said. “They were a present from her godfather, who

was a very rich man."

"You mean they are *real* pearls?"

He nodded. "I think the thread is still secure. I had intended to keep them for your twenty-first birthday, but I think this is as good an occasion."

"Real pearls!" Penny murmured incredulously, fingering the strand with awe. "Oh, Clare, aren't they beautiful! I shall feel like a queen!"

After tea both girls had a bath and then lay down on the bed until it was time to dress.

"It's like Christmas Eve," Penny said breathlessly. "I can hardly wait for eight o'clock. Last year I had summer 'flu and couldn't go, you know. I was terribly disappointed."

She chattered on, too keyed up to sleep.

At last the hands of the clock crept round to half-past six and she sprang up excitedly, impatient to begin dressing.

"Now, you're not to say a word until I've done your face and combed out your hair," Clare warned her, draping a towel round her shoulders.

"All right," Penny agreed obediently. "Won't it be funny if nobody recognises me?" She laughed, but Clare saw that her hands were trembling and guessed how desperately nervous she was.

Half an hour later she stood back and surveyed her handiwork. The transformation was incredible.

"You can look now," she said quietly.

Penny flew to the looking-glass. For a full minute she stared at her reflection incredulously.

"I can't believe it!" she whispered. "Why . . . I look pretty . . . really pretty."

"Of course you do," Clare said gently.

The experiment had exceeded her hopes. Penny's golden hair curled in glossy ringlets about her small heart-shaped face. Properly made up, her milky complexion

had the translucent texture of camellia petals, and a discreet touch of sapphire shadow emphasised the deep gentian blue of her eyes. To accentuate the delicacy of her colouring, Clare had used a clear red lipstick and the merest dusting of rouge. From a pale, insignificant-looking girl, Penny had blossomed into something very close to beauty.

"Oh, Clare . . . how can I thank you?" she stammered. "I never dreamed I could look like this."

Her eyes filled with tears and Clare said hastily, "Don't dare cry. It will ruin your mascara, and I must do my own face or I shall arrive looking like a peeled onion."

Penny gave a choky laugh. "I'm sorry to be such a fool, but you can't imagine what it's like to look in the mirror and see a completely new face."

"It's the same one you've had for twenty years, only you got it into your head that you were a Plain Jane. Come on, get dressed and then go and dazzle your father."

By half-past seven they were both ready.

"How well we contrast, like Rose Red and Snow White," Penny said.

"Let's hope there are two Prince Charmings at the ball." Clare answered gaily.

For a second their eyes met, each wondering if the other knew her secret.

"Now we must display ourselves to Father." Penny gathered up her skirts and swept on to the landing.

"Is that you, Penny? I can't find my driving gloves, dear," Mr. Conyers called up from the hall.

Penny grinned. "Watch him faint with shock!" she whispered.

Clare leaned over the banisters and watched her go down. Already the girl seemed to have new poise, and there was no doubt that she looked enchanting in the demure blue-and-white dress with its long skirt and frills

at neck and hem, and the string of pearls clasped round her slender white throat.

Mr. Conyers was hunting for his gloves in the hall chest, and he did not catch sight of his daughter until she was half-way down the staircase.

There was a moment's silence while he stared at her, and then Penny said, "Well . . . do I look nice?"

Without a word her father held out his arms, and she ran down the last few stairs and threw herself into his arms.

"For a moment I thought it was your mother," he said softly. "You look lovely, my dear. As lovely as she did."

Unwilling to break in on this intimate moment, Clare withdrew into the shadows until Penny called, "Clare, where are you? Father hasn't seen you yet."

Then, smilingly, she went down to join them.

"I've put a dust-sheet in the back of the car to protect our dresses," Penny said when her father had complimented Clare on her appearance.

"Then if you'll tell me where my gloves are, we'll be off."

"In the sitting-room. I was mending one of the fingers." Penny ran off to retrieve them.

"I don't suppose I shall see much of you two tonight," the Vicar said gaily, helping Clare with her wrap.

She laughed. "You never know. Paul may have imported a whole bevy of beauties and we shall be completely overshadowed."

"I feel like Cinderella," Penny said as they climbed carefully into the back of the car and spread out their skirts. "Oh, Clare, how can you be so calm? Aren't you excited?"

"Yes, of course I am."

I'm terrified, she thought. Ironically, now that she was no longer concerned with bolstering Penny's morale, she found herself consumed with nerves. For her the ball had

a special significance. It was more than just a gala occasion. Tonight she would meet David on her ground instead of his. If the romantic influence of candlelight and lilting music and carefree laughter failed to mellow his attitude to her, then she would know that she meant nothing to him, that the scene by the ditch had merely been, in his view, an unfortunate accident. In her innermost heart she still could not believe that this was so, but the next few hours would prove her right or wrong.

It was this sense of gambling with the future that had prompted her to scour the Norwich shops for a special dress. Finally, although the price was twice what she had intended to pay, she had chosen a white lace culotte suit which she was sure David would find too way-out and dramatic. By the time they reached the Hall she was tense with misgivings.

Paul was at the door to greet them. Clare was momentarily distracted from her doubts by the comical expression of astonishment on his face as he saw Penny. To her amusement, Penny managed to conceal her excitement and returned his greeting, not with her former shyness, but with a certain cool reserve. She was learning fast!

A maid led them upstairs to discard their wraps.

"Has Miss Lancaster arrived yet?" Clare asked her.

"No, miss."

So he was not yet here. She slipped off her coat with a feeling of relief.

"Listen! The orchestra is beginning," Penny exclaimed. "Are you ready? I don't want to waste a single minute."

At that moment Mrs. Harker, the mother of Jenny's American playmates, was shown in. Clare had met her in the village and introduced Penny.

"Well, if this isn't a wonderful end to our vacation," Janine Harker said as they waited for her. "I've always wanted to see inside an ancestral home, and my husband

met Mr. Mallinson and he invited us along. Oh, and I have a message for you, Miss Drake. You know we were not too keen to leave the kids alone in the caravan, and I guess Annabel must have told Jenny we were coming, because a little while ago Mr. Lancaster drove over and suggested they spend the night at your house. He said to tell you he and his aunt would be here around eight-thirty."

"What a good idea. Jenny won't be so disappointed at not coming if she has Tod and Annabel to keep her company."

"That's so. I only hope that nice cook of yours can keep my two terrors in order," Mrs. Harker said, laughing. In her sophisticated black dress she looked too youthful and vivacious to be the mother of teenage children.

"Mr. Mallinson asked us to bring a couple of friends along," she added. "So Cliff phoned a couple of his buddies back at base and they drove over this afternoon. I gather there's a man shortage in these parts, though I shouldn't think you two will lack partners. Shall we go down?"

Her husband's friends proved to be two tall, blond, immaculately uniformed young giants who lost no time in whirling Penny and Clare on to the dance floor.

Having elicited the information that her partner hailed from Texas, Clare had no conversational problems. Like all Texans, Lieutenant Joe Wilder was eager to extol the magnificence of his home state. He was a likeable young man and a superb dancer, so that very soon Clare felt her spirits soaring.

"Say, this is like something out of Hollywood," he exclaimed, as the music ended and they strolled on to the terrace. "Back in Texas we have some fine mansions, but I guess they don't have the same atmosphere. I'll have to write to my folks about this."

Henderson, the butler, appeared beside them with a

tray of cocktails, and the lieutenant was even more impressed.

Glancing at his watch, Clare saw that it was almost half-past eight. The guests were arriving in a constant stream now, and perhaps at this moment David was helping his aunt out of the car.

"Would you care to dance again?" the lieutenant asked.

"I'd love to." When David saw her, she wanted to be gay and enjoying herself.

The ballroom was becoming crowded now, the women's dresses like brilliant butterfly wings against the white and gold panelling. A great bank of hydrangeas surrounded the musicians' dais, and garden scents drifted through the terrace doors to mingle with the man-made fragrance of Chanel and Lanvin.

Gliding and turning beneath the crystal chandeliers, Clare understood what the young American meant by the atmosphere of the house. For nearly two hundred years this beautiful room had been the scene of dancing and laughter and grave and gay flirtation.

At the end of the dance they made their way to the Chippendale couch where the others were sitting. Scarcely knowing what she was saying, Clare joined in the light-hearted chatter. The minutes seemed endless until suddenly the men rose to their feet and, turning, she saw Miss Lancaster coming towards them with David just behind her.

She had never seen him in evening dress before, and he looked so distinguished that her heart flew out to him in tender admiration.

But it was not until the young Americans had been introduced to Miss Lancaster and the group had made room for the new arrivals that she permitted herself a second glance at him. He was bending towards Penny, and from the pleased colour in the girl's cheeks, Clare

guessed that he was complimenting her on her dress.

Then Captain Jacobs stood up and said, "May I have the pleasure of this dance, Miss Drake?" and much against her will she was obliged to accept.

Captain Jacobs was another expert dancer, but although she enjoyed the effortless ease with which he steered her round the floor, it took all her self-control not to look back at the group round the couch.

The next dance was a Paul Jones, and Clare's second partner was a military-looking old man with a fierce white moustache who introduced himself as Colonel Lyndon from the neighbouring village of Greenstaithe.

"Like old times tonight," he panted, seizing her round the waist and propelling her through the crush with more vigour than finesse. "Used to come here when young Malinson's father was alive, y'know. Always was one of the finest houses in the county. Don't know how the boy manages to keep it up with the Government trying to cripple us all. Ought to get married though. Needs a pretty woman to play hostess in a place like this."

Her next partner was the Vicar.

"Enjoying yourself?" he asked kindly.

"One could hardly help it in this lovely house," she said.

"Yes, it is a beautiful old place," he agreed. "It's a pity Paul hasn't got a family, but I suppose he'll settle down one of these days."

Clare wondered if he knew that his daughter was in love with Paul. It seemed unlikely.

At that moment Penny whirled past them in the arms of Lieutenant Wilder. She looked on top of the world, her lips parted in a radiant smile, her blue eyes shining like jewels.

"You must be very proud of her," Clare said softly.

The Vicar looked troubled.

"You know, Miss Drake, I realised tonight that in my

preoccupation with the welfare of my parishioners I have been guilty of overlooking the needs of my own child," he said soberly. "I'm afraid that Penny has not had the opportunities that a girl of her age is entitled to. I've allowed her to spend far too much time helping me in the parish when she should have been mixing with young people of her own age."

"But I'm sure that Penny loves helping you," Clare said swiftly. "It's just that she seems to have rather an inferiority complex about her looks – though I don't think she'll go on believing herself a Plain Jane after tonight," she added, smiling.

"We are both very much indebted to you," he said sincerely. "Your friendship has meant a great deal to her. I've noticed how much brighter she has been lately. I'm not a wealthy man, but I have a little money set aside. I wondered if you would be kind enough to take the child over to Norwich one of these days and help her choose some new clothes."

"Yes, of course. I should love to. It's just what she needs, although I expect she'll protest that it is an extravagance. She will make somebody a wonderful wife one of these days, because she's so sweet and unselfish."

"Yes, she is like her mother in that," Mr. Conyers said gently. "If my wife had lived, all this would not have happened, of course. I can only hope that my neglect hasn't done any lasting harm."

"You mustn't think such a thing," Clare protested. "Penny is devoted to you, and she has never been really unhappy, I'm convinced of that. Now that she knows she is just as attractive as other girls, it will make all the difference."

"I don't think she is the only young woman who will make a wonderful wife," the Vicar said. "Miss Lancaster told me that you had lost your parents and were more or less alone in the world. Perhaps that is why you have the

gift of understanding other people's difficulties. I hope you find happiness for yourself, my dear."

The music ended and they rejoined Miss Lancaster and the Harkers. A moment later Penny returned with David. They were holding hands and Clare was shocked to feel a little stab of jealousy. I'm losing my sense of proportion, she thought ashamedly. David has known Penny for years and he is eleven years her senior.

The band struck up a waltz and the Vicar asked Miss Lancaster to dance, followed by Cliff Harker and Penny and Lieutenant Wilder and Mrs. Harker.

Clare fiddled with her empty cocktail glass.

"Would you care to dance?"

If he had been a stranger in a railway carriage asking permission to open the window, his voice could not have been more politely impersonal. For the first time that evening their eyes met and she knew with dull certainty that already she had failed.

Without a word she preceded him on to the floor.

And then, at the touch of his hand, something magical seemed to happen to her. For weeks she had lived on an emotional tight-rope, forcing herself to appear calm and casual when all the time she was seething with uncertainty and longing. Now, suddenly, her restraint snapped and she knew only that she loved him and could no longer hide her feelings. Tomorrow, if need be, she would leave Creek House and go far away and never see him again, but tonight, for the space of a few hours, she would let her emotions run riot and forget the consequences.

She closed her eyes and let the rhythm of the music flow through her body.

Every fibre of her being responded to the lilting music and a strange sense of intoxication crept over her so that she was conscious of nothing but the singing of the violins and the scent of flowers and the strong arm encircling her.

And then, with incredulous joy, she felt the arm slowly drawing her closer and his clasp on her hand tightening until she was pressed against him and the rhythm was flowing through them both.

Wonderingly she opened her eyes and looked up at him, and her heart soared, for his blue eyes were no longer hostile and cold but dark with passion.

Neither of them was aware of the interested and speculative glances which followed them as they glided across the floor in perfect unison, oblivious of everyone but each other. At last the melody died away and they drifted to a standstill.

"Come on to the terrace," David said huskily.

His arm was still round her waist, and he did not remove it as they went through the tall doors into the lantern-lit dimness outside.

In a patch of shadow he pulled her against him, looking down at her upturned face with an intent, searching expression. In the diffused glow from the lanterns, her skin had the pearly sheen of alabaster. His hand moved upwards and caressed her bare back.

"Oh God, why are you so beautiful?" he whispered thickly. "Do you think I am made of stone; that I can work with you day after day and not be aware of how maddeningly lovely you are? Do you think I can resist you forever?"

"Do you want to resist me, David?" she asked softly.

He crushed her savagely against him, his lips brushing her temple.

"I can't," he said fiercely. "God knows, I've tried. If you knew what you do to me, Clare!"

The sound of footsteps and voices broke in on them.

David cursed under his breath and let her go.

"I must talk to you," he said urgently. "The maze is the only place where we shall get any privacy tonight."

They walked along the terrace, past the couple who

had intruded on them. Just as they were about to go down the steps on to the lawn a stout matron in trailing grey lace rushed out from the ballroom and cried archly, "There you are, Mr. Lancaster. Now don't tell me you've forgotten your promise that we should dance the valeta together. It's just beginning, so we must hurry, you naughty boy. I'm sure you won't mind if I borrow him for a little while," she said to Clare.

David's face was thunderous, but in the circumstances he could hardly refuse to dance without being rude.

"I shan't be long. Will you wait for me down there?" he asked in an undertone.

She nodded and with a swift pressure of her hand he followed the importunate dowager into the ballroom.

Clare stood still for a moment, savouring her delight. Then she turned and ran down the steps on to the lawn. Her heart was so full of happiness that she wanted to shout it aloud. It was like coming out of a long dark tunnel into a world of light. Her whole body trembled with rapture, and she raised her face to the glimmering stars and breathed a silent prayer of relief and gratitude.

She was passing through the rose-garden when there was a sound behind her and someone called, "Hey there, wait for me!"

It was Paul. She had completely forgotten his existence.

"Where are you off to? I've been looking for you," he said, catching her up.

Clare smiled brilliantly at him, and with a spontaneous gesture of happiness she held out her hands. Dear Paul! He would be so glad for her when he knew.

"The trouble with these affairs is that the poor wretched host is so busy looking after his guests that he doesn't get a chance to enjoy himself," he said ruefully. "You look very ravishing tonight, my lovely one."

She laughed. "It's a ravishing occasion. Oh, Paul, I'm so happy."

And then, because he was partly responsible for the blissful condition, she stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek.

What happened next had a nightmare quality. Instead of the teasing enquiry she had expected – for surely it must be obvious what had happened to her – he seized her in a passionate embrace and kissed her full on the lips. Before she could recover her wits he raised his head and said hoarsely, “Marry me, Clare. Say you’ll marry me. Oh, my darling, my beautiful, don’t you know that I love you? I’ve wanted you for weeks. You love me, too, don’t you? No, don’t deny it, you funny shy little thing. I’ve seen it in your eyes. Say yes, my angel, and we’ll announce it tonight. It’ll be the perfect end to the ball.”

“Paul!”

With a cry of horror she wrenched herself away from him.

For a second or two he looked taken aback; then, with a knowing laugh, he reached for her and said, “You don’t have to be maidenly and modest with me, sweetheart. Did I startle you? You shouldn’t look so desirable, Clare. . . .”

With a moan of dismay she tried to resist him, but he was too strong for her, and her anguished protests were stifled by the hungry pressure of his lips. Half fainting from the shock of this violent outburst, Clare beat frantically against his chest with her clenched fists, but as if she were a child he pinioned her wrists and kissed her with increasing ardour.

It was over as suddenly as it had begun. One moment she was recoiling in petrified disgust from the almost brutal ferocity of his embrace; the next she was free, released so suddenly that she almost lost her balance and fell. Shivering with nausea, she buried her face in her hands, unable to control the great gasping sobs that rose in her throat.

A low groan brought her back to reality. Bemusedly she

opened her eyes. Paul was spread-eagled on the grass, rubbing his jaw and wincing. Between them stood David, massaging the knuckles of his right hand, his face a mask of contemptuous fury.

"David . . . oh, thank heaven!" With a cry of relief she stumbled towards him.

"Pull yourself together. We don't want half a dozen witnesses."

Before she could fling herself into the blessed haven of his arms, he had bent down and heaved Paul to his feet.

"You'd better slip in through the conservatory and clean yourself up unless you want your guests to know what you've been up to," he said grimly. "The next time you go in for that sort of thing, I should choose somewhere more secluded."

Horror-stricken, Clare watched Paul stagger off towards the house.

"You hit him!" she faltered.

"Yes, I hit him," David said curtly. "Don't worry. He'll have a swollen jaw tomorrow, but he'll recover."

"It was ghastly," she said piteously. "He was like a maniac. I never dreamed . . . Oh, why did it have to happen tonight?"

Then, at the look on his face, she caught her breath.

Surely he didn't think, he *couldn't* think that she was to blame.

"I don't *imagine* anything," he said with a cruel emphasis. "Paul is hardly a pillar of chivalry, but even he doesn't lose his head without encouragement."

And without waiting for her answer he turned on his heel and strode away.

CHAPTER XI

CLARE sat on the edge of her bed and pressed the palms of her hands against her aching forehead. The first pale light of dawn was filtering through the window and the hands of the alarm clock showed a quarter-past six. All night she had lain sleepless, racked with misery and humiliation. Twice she had flung back the tumbled bed-clothes with the intention of packing her things and leaving before the rest of the household was up, and then the remnants of common sense had told her that such an action would be foolishly impetuous, for the first bus did not leave the village until ten o'clock and she could not walk the five miles to Greenstaithe Halt in pitch darkness with a heavy suitcase to carry.

Now, shivering with fatigue, she pulled on slacks and a sweater and crept downstairs, feeling that if she had to stay in the bedroom for another hour she would go mad.

Josh scrambled out of his basket as she entered the kitchen, and when she had unlocked the back door he pushed past her and bounded into the garden. The early morning air was blessedly cool and fresh, and as she went out by the little wicket-gate and began to walk along the towpath the ghastly feeling of suffocation dissipated. By the time she had reached the dyke her headache had eased and she was able to think more clearly.

One thing was certain. She would not stay at Creek House an hour longer than was necessary, for from now on there could be nothing but bitter animosity between herself and David Lancaster.

A wave of repugnance swept over her. What a fool she had been; what a blind fool to think herself in love with him. It had been nothing more than a compelling physi-

cal attraction to which she had succumbed with a readiness which now filled her with self-loathing.

As for David, he did not know the meaning of love.

Reaching the bend in the dyke, she sat down on a boulder and gazed moodily across the deserted mud-flats. Perhaps it was better this way. The dénouement would have come sooner or later, and now she could leave and pick up the threads of her old life and try to forget the whole shaming interlude. He would scarcely have the face to quibble when she gave him immediate notice, and by this time next week she would be back in London with nothing tangible to remind her that, at twenty-six, she had lost her head like an infatuated schoolgirl.

Something warm brushed her leg, and looking down she saw Josh sitting beside her, his doleful brown eyes fixed on her face as if he sensed that she was in trouble and was offering mute sympathy. She fondled his silky ears and he gave a little wheeze of pleasure and licked her wrist with his rough pink tongue.

"Oh, Josh, it isn't true! None of it is true. I still love him dreadfully. I shall always love him. Oh, what *am* I to do?"

With a despairing sob she slid down beside the old dog and buried her face in his neck. This was the very nadir of her degradation: that while her mind recoiled in disgust from the idea of loving where love was not wanted, in the innermost core of her heart the flame of love continued to burn. However much she might try to convince herself that love had turned to hate, a small voice inside her persisted that it was all a poor pretence, that love, once given, can never be retrieved.

How *can* I go on loving him when all he feels for me is contempt and mistrust,? she thought bitterly. Even now, if he came and asked my forgiveness I would give it to him. But he won't. He would never beg forgiveness of

anyone. And he has never really loved me, for with love there is trust and he does not trust any woman.

Yet how could he think that I would go straight from his arms to Paul's? Oh, if only he had not promised to dance with that wretched woman none of this would have happened. Today would have been the happiest day of my life, and instead it is the most wretched.

Oh, David, my darling, how can I put you out of my thoughts when every time I close my eyes I see your face and hear the echo of your voice and ache for the touch of your hand? How can I face the future knowing that I shall never see you again, and that every day will be a dreary void without purpose or meaning?

The first gleam of sunlight was pricking through the early haze when at last she struggled to her feet and began to walk back to the house.

Hilda was just coming downstairs as she went indoors, and with a muttered greeting Clare hurried past her.

She was making her bed when there was a tap at the door and Jenny appeared.

"Well, was it lovely? Did you enjoy yourself? Did you have champagne? Who did you dance with?" she asked excitedly.

Clare was obliged to give an account of the ball, although she found it difficult to simulate the enthusiasm Jenny obviously expected. Most of the details seemed to have been blotted out of her mind by that frightful scene in the rose-garden.

She had forgotten that Tod and Annabel Harker were in the house, and breakfast was an ordeal, for the three children were insatiable in their thirst for a minute-by-minute description of the festivities.

The one respite was that David did not appear at the table. Hilda said he had left a note that he would be out on the marsh until midday.

"Though what he's up to when he didn't get to bed

until three is beyond me," she added in a mystified tone.

After breakfast Jenny accompanied the young Harkers back to the caravan and Clare went into the study. She felt dog-tired and longed to go back to bed, but she knew that if she did so she would probably sleep the clock round, and that was impossible. She had to see David as soon as he returned.

She was staring dully at the typewriter keys when there was a sound by the window and looking up she saw Paul.

They stared at each other for a moment, and then he said in a low voice, "May I speak to you for a moment, Clare?"

Her instinctive reaction was to beg him to go away and leave her in peace, but something in his face checked her and she said listlessly, "Yes, of course."

He swung himself over the window-sill, and she remembered how he had done the same thing on her first day at Creek House. How long ago it seemed.

"I've come to apologise for last night," he said after a difficult pause. "I don't expect you to forgive me – I behaved like a brute – but I want you to know that I am honestly sorry."

"It's all right, Paul. I know you didn't mean to be like that. Let's forget it," she said as casually as possible.

"I can't forget it," he said in a strained voice. "I haven't slept all night for thinking about it. Oh, I know it's no excuse to say that I had had too much to drink – there isn't any excuse for my behaviour – but I'm deeply ashamed; and if there was any way in which I could prove it. . . ." He broke off abruptly and then said, "I'll go now. You must be very tired. I won't bother you again."

"Paul . . . wait!"

"Yes?" He looked at her enquiringly and she saw how haggard he was. There were dark shadows under his eyes, and the angle of his jaw was badly bruised.

"Don't go like that," she said quickly. "Of course I for-

give you. It wasn't so terribly wicked. You were . . . a little gay . . . and you kissed me. It isn't the end of the world. Please don't feel so badly about it."

He stared at her in genuine amazement. "You mean you don't hate me?"

"Of course not. How could I? We've always been good friends. Come, let's forget it happened." She held out her hand to him.

With a hesitancy that was curiously moving, he took it in his.

"You're an angel," he said huskily. "Any other girl –"

"You promised to forget it," she reminded him.

"It isn't easy to forget you've hurt someone whom . . . whom you love. No, don't draw back like that, my dearest. I must say this. I was tight last night, but not so tight that I didn't know what I was saying. I asked you to marry me, and I meant it. God knows I've no right to say this to you now, but I can't bottle it up any longer. For the first time in my life I've fallen in love – with you, Clare. I didn't believe there was such a thing as love until you came here, and every time we met I felt something strange happening to me. I know I'm not much of a man, but with you to help me I could make something of my life even now. I'd look after you, Clare, I'd give you everything you wanted. We could be very happy together. Will you . . . think it over, my dear?"

His sincerity was unmistakable, and the look in his eyes was very different from the old teasing admiration.

How ironic, she thought. He is offering me all the things I long for – tenderness and comfort and love. But because he is the wrong man they are meaningless.

"Paul . . . I don't know how to answer you," she said uncertainly. "I'm very honoured that you should want to marry me, and I'm very fond of you, but –"

"But you don't love me?" he prompted gently. "I know that, Clare. But I think in time you might come to do so,

and until then I wouldn't ask anything that you were not ready to give."

"You don't understand," she said miserably. "It wouldn't be fair to marry you on that basis, knowing that I could never give you more than affection."

"Never?" he asked quietly.

She shook her head. "No, never."

He let go of her hand and turned away.

"You're in love with David, aren't you?"

She did not answer, and he swung round and took her gently by the shoulders. "Aren't you, Clare?"

Her face contracted with pain and he held her against him, stroking her hair with infinite compassion.

"My poor darling, I should have guessed it."

"He doesn't love me," she said hollowly. "But how could I marry you when —" She could not finish the sentence.

"You can't spend the rest of your life alone," he said softly. "We could go away on a long cruise. You've often said you would like to travel. In time you'd forget him. You trust me, don't you? You know I wouldn't force myself on you?"

"Oh, Paul, I'm so confused. So terribly muddled. Give me time to think. I'm so tired I hardly know what I'm saying," she begged.

He dropped a light kiss on her hair. "I'm sorry, my sweet," he said contritely. "You must be worn out. I'll leave you in peace till tomorrow. Just remember that I love you very much, will you?"

When he had gone she sank into the leather armchair and closed her eyes. What a hopeless tangle it was! That Paul, the supposedly incorrigible rake, should have fallen in love with her at the very time when she was breaking her heart over David was the finishing touch. Why did this thing called love have to make fools of everyone?

Now Paul would suffer the tortures that she was already enduring.

He had said he did not expect her to love him, but could a marriage succeed without love?

Surely the time would come when he would grow restive and dissatisfied. He had so much to offer and she so little. As his wife she would have everything a woman could want, and what could she give in return? Nothing but affectionate companionship, a poor substitute for the bright fire of love. In any case, marriage to Paul would mean living at the Hall, and in such a small community it would be impossible to avoid occasional meetings with David. She shrank from the thought. No, it was madness even to consider such a step. If she had not been so upset and weary she would have told him at once that she could never marry him instead of heartlessly raising his hopes by pleading for time to think it over.

To what depths had she sunk that she could be tempted by the prospect of material security?

She must have fallen asleep, for when she opened her eyes Penny Conyers was bending over her.

"Hallo. I'm sorry if I startled you. I came through the kitchen, and Hilda asked me to bring in your elevenses."

"Thank you." Clare took the cup of coffee which Penny handed to her. "You look very wide awake," she said. "I can hardly keep my eyes open."

"M'm, I felt a bit bleary-eyed earlier on, but it seems to have worn off. I shall probably have a rest this afternoon. Well, what did you think of the ball?"

"It . . . was great fun," Clare said carefully.

"I didn't see much of you after the first hour or so. What time did you leave?"

"Oh, about two o'clock."

Clare shied from remembering the drive home, with Miss Lancaster chattering gaily and David and herself wrapped in dreadful silence. She had no clear recollection

of what had happened between the scene in the rose-garden and their departure. She remembered dancing with several people whose faces had appeared oddly blurred, but that was all.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" she asked Penny.

"Yes, it was wonderful," Penny said brightly, and then, to Clare's horror, her face puckered up and she burst into tears.

"Penny! What on earth is the matter?" Clare cried, springing up and putting her arms round the younger girl.

"Nothing. Nothing at all," Penny sobbed, fumbling for a handkerchief. "It's just me. I'm such an idiot."

Clare waited until her sobs had subsided a little and then she said gently, "Something has happened to upset you. Can't you tell me what it is?"

Penny blew her nose and wiped her eyes.

"I love him so much, Clare. I have done for years . . . ever since I was quite little. Last night I thought that it would all be different, that he'd notice me and treat me like a woman instead of a child. But it wasn't different at all. He hardly spoke to me."

"Who, Penny? Who are you talking about?"

"Why, Paul, of course."

So she had been right. Penny was in love with Paul. Clare's heart was wrung with pity for her.

"Are you sure you love him?" she asked. "He's so much older than you are, dear."

"I know," Penny said disconsolately. She had stopped crying, but her expression was infinitely forlorn. "I know it's absurd. We have nothing in common, and he will never look at me. But it doesn't stop me loving him. You can't stop loving people however hopeless it is." She sighed and straightened her drooping shoulders.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what made me blurt it all out like that." A wry smile flickered across her mouth. "You

know, when you first came here, I was terribly jealous. I knew that Paul was attracted to you, and I felt I couldn't bear to watch. Then I guessed that you were in love with David, and I thought that perhaps there was still a faint chance for me. It was crazy of course, because Paul doesn't know I exist. How he'd laugh if he knew the way I feel."

"What do you mean, you guessed that I was in love with David?" Clare asked quickly.

"When you're in love yourself it makes you more sensitive to other people's feelings," Penny said gently. "It isn't going very well for you either, is it?"

Clare bit her lip. "No."

Penny sighed. "How much easier life would be if we didn't have hearts," she said sadly. "I suppose we had better drink the coffee or it will be cold."

"How did you know that . . . that it wasn't going well for me?" Clare asked.

"Because I've known David for so long. Loving him could never be easy. Ever since that girl jilted him – I expect you knew about that, didn't you? – he's walled himself up and never allowed anyone to get really close to him. I thought you might be the one to break down the barrier he puts round himself, but perhaps he's lost the capacity to love anyone again. Bitterness is a frightful thing. It eats into you, and I think that's what has happened to him."

Clare drank the tepid coffee. And now I, too, am in danger of growing bitter, she thought wretchedly.

"I must go. Father wants his lunch early today," Penny said. "There's one advantage in being the Vicar's daughter. It doesn't leave one time to sit about brooding. Good-bye, Clare, forgive me for burdening you with my troubles."

Clare saw her to the door and then took the coffee cups to the kitchen.

"Here comes Mr. David," Hilda said, glancing out of

the window. "Now he'll want a hot drink, I suppose. Going without his breakfast after all those shenanigans up at the Hall last night! I never heard of such nonsense!"

Clare braced herself. This is it, she thought. I must get it over. The longer I delay, the worse it will be.

As she went into the hall, David came through the garden door. His hair was tousled and he had not shaved.

"May I speak to you, please?" she said at once.

His eyes were like blue flints, and for a moment she thought he was going to ignore her.

Then he said curtly, "If you wish," and walked past her towards the study.

Quaking with nerves, Clare followed him. She knew that this was going to be the most unpleasant interview of her life, for he was obviously in one of his most unyielding moods.

"Well, Miss Drake?" he said impatiently as she shut the door.

Clare lifted her chin and forced herself to meet his eyes.

"I want to give notice," she said stiffly.

"I see. When do you propose to leave?"

"As soon as possible. I'm sorry if it interferes with your book, but—"

"There's no need for apologies," he cut in. "You want to leave and that's all there is to it. You aren't under contract. May I know your reasons?"

She was staggered. Surely he could not have imagined that she would stay after last night.

"I should have thought they were obvious," she said coldly.

"Indeed. In that case I must be singularly obtuse, for they're not obvious to me."

She guessed that he was deliberately baiting her, and her temper rose.

"I'm leaving because you've made it impossible for me to stay," she said bluntly.

"Oh, and how have I done that?"

"By your behaviour last night and on several other occasions. I should have left weeks ago."

"You mean you are annoyed because I knocked your friend Mallinson down. I've no doubt you can smooth his ruffled feathers."

It was a long time since Clare had lost her temper. The last occasion had been when she had seen a gang of louts jeering at a crippled boy. Then, as now, her rage matched her fiery hair.

"How dare you stand there with that superior sneer as if you were on a higher plane than everyone else!" she cried furiously. "What right have you to judge Paul? Haven't you ever lost control of yourself? But I suppose your lapses from grace don't count. You're so busy imputing unworthy motives for other people's actions that it never occurs to you how intolerably egotistic and bigoted you are yourself!"

She paused for breath and he said freezingly, "Is this extraordinary harangue a necessary feature of your departure, Miss Drake?"

"Yes, I think it is," she retorted. "It's about time somebody told you the truth about yourself, Mr. Lancaster. You can't ride roughshod over *everyone*, you know. From the day I arrived here you suspected me of gold-digging, when all I wanted was peace and quiet and a change from London. More than once you've accused me of setting my cap at Paul Mallinson when he has never been anything more than a good friend. Twice you've forced your kisses on me and then implied that I lured you into it, and last night you lost control again and not ten minutes later you knocked a man down for the very offence which you had just committed. I suppose I should be honoured by your attentions. Well, I'm not! Sincerity comes pretty

high on my list of the virtues, Mr. Lancaster, and it seems to me that you are just about the worst hypocrite I've ever met. Simply because you've been jilted once, you've let it warp and embitter you until you see your own cynicism reflected in everyone else. . . ."

She broke off, horrified at what she had said. To accuse him of being self-centred and hypocritical was justifiable, but to drag up the past and taunt him with it was a cruelty which appalled her.

Pale and breathing hard, she waited for his retaliation. But he said nothing.

"I'm sorry," she said brokenly. "I had no right to speak to you like that. I'll leave at once."

"On the contrary, you will leave at the end of the week. Whatever my own feelings may be, I must insist that you do not upset my aunt," he said tonelessly. "For that reason, I should be obliged if you would try to hide your animosity towards me for the rest of your stay here. You can tell my aunt that you have been offered a good post in London, and that since my book is nearly completed I am releasing you almost immediately."

CHAPTER XII

OVER lunch, David broke the news that Clare was leaving them.

Jenny was most upset, for she had become very much attached to her, but Miss Lancaster, who might have been expected to express some astonishment at this abrupt departure, took it surprisingly calmly.

So calmly, in fact, that Clare felt distinctly uneasy. She knew that if the old lady questioned her she would not be able to elaborate on the pretext of the "excellent post in London" which David had fabricated.

Although she shared his desire not to worry his aunt, she felt that it would have been better to tell her the truth. His motive for concealing the real reason for her leaving was not clear to her; unless it was that he thought his aunt might try to reconcile them, which would only be an added embarrassment.

"In that case I had better put the finishing touches to my picture," Miss Lancaster said when she learned that Clare intended to leave Creek House on the Saturday. "I suppose you will want to get on with your book, David, but perhaps you could spare Clare for an hour this afternoon."

"By all means," he said.

Immediately after the meal they retired to the spare bedroom which was being used as a studio.

"I expect you are tired after last night, my dear. It won't take long."

She worked in silence for some minutes and then said, "Tell me, have you been happy here?"

"Yes, very happy," Clare said.

To a great extent this was true. She had come to love the quiet village and the vast silent marshes. For Miss

Lancaster and Jenny and Hilda she felt a sincere affection. It was only in her relations with David that things had gone wrong.

"We shall miss you. Just extend your left hand a trifle. That's better. I had hoped that you might prolong your stay with us."

Clare glanced sharply at her, but she was hidden by the easel.

"The book is almost finished, so I should have had to leave in a week or two, anyway," she said awkwardly.

"Yes, I wasn't thinking about the book."

"I don't understand?"

"Don't you, my dear?" Miss Lancaster looked round the edge of the canvas with a quizzical expression, and with guilty dismay Clare realised that David had overestimated his aunt's credulity. She had not been taken in at all.

"Please don't think that I wanted to deceive you," she said pleadingly. "It was just that Mr. Lancaster thought . . . we both felt . . . Oh dear, it's so difficult to explain now."

"It seems quite simple to me. The truth, I presume, is that you and David have reached an *impasse* and to leave is the easiest way out."

Clare flushed scarlet. Did *everyone* know how she felt about him?

"We had a row," she said miserably. "I . . . I lost my temper and was very rude to him. I couldn't stay after that."

"Am I right in thinking that you love him?" Miss Lancaster asked.

For a moment Clare was tempted to deny it. Then she said in a choked voice, "Yes, quite right."

"But he doesn't love you?"

She shook her head. Was there to be no limit to her abasement?

"He has never really liked me, and after what I said to him this morning I should think he must hate me," she said wearily.

To her relief Miss Lancaster did not pursue the subject. Half an hour later she threw down her brushes and said, "There! Finished at last! Now come and tell what you think of it."

Clare walked round the front of the easel and gazed at the picture.

After some minutes she said quietly, "It's very good. Much too flattering, of course, but the colours are beautiful and you can almost feel the slipperiness of that seaweed in the foreground."

"It isn't at all flattering," Miss Lancaster said bluntly. "You have a lovely and sensitive face, my child, and I think I may say that I have managed to catch quite a creditable likeness."

She lit a cigarette and surveyed the finished work with a critical eye.

The picture showed Clare leaning on a rock looking down into a shallow pool. The background was shadowy and there was a suggestion of glistening scales and gossamer fins. The flesh of the face and arms had a faintly greenish tinge, and the whole picture was dominated by the silky mane of burnished red-gold-hair. Without understanding any of the technicalities of painting, Clare recognised that it was an extremely accomplished piece of work, and for an amateur artist of Miss Lancaster's age it was something of a triumph.

"If I were you I should try to get an hour's sleep before tea. David has gone out, and you can't work until you've had a rest," Miss Lancaster advised her. "Run along, my dear. You look fit to drop."

Because by this time she was feeling the full effects of her sleepless night and the stormy passage in the study, Clare did not argue. She went up to her bedroom, took off

her dress and lay down under the counterpane. Almost immediately she fell into a heavy sleep.

She was roused by a gentle pressure on her shoulder.

"I've brought you a cup of tea," Jenny said softly. "Do you feel better?"

"M'm, I was desperately tired," Clare said, sipping the hot sweet tea and wishing she could stay where she was for the rest of the day.

"I'm sorry you're going back to London," said Jenny. "Couldn't you possibly stay a bit longer?"

"I'm afraid not, Jenny-wren. You must send me a post-card if you go to Bangkok for Christmas." She tried to sound cheerful.

"Yes, I will," Jenny promised. "Anyway, I'm glad you came to work for Uncle David. It would have been ghastly if we'd got another Bunberry-ish secretary."

"Poor Miss Bunberry. Will you ever forget her?"

"I shouldn't think so," the little girl said solemnly. "You can't forget people who are as awful as that."



After tea Clare slipped on a mackintosh and walked through the village to the Hall. A light rain was falling, and it seemed to her that the first hint of autumn was in the air.

Henderson looked slightly surprised when she knocked at the door and asked if Paul was at home. He asked her to wait in the morning-room and went in search of his master.

A few moments later Paul hurried in.

"Clare! My dear girl, why didn't you ring up? I would have come to fetch you. Are you very wet?"

"No, hardly at all. I wanted a walk."

He took her raincoat and flung it on a chair.

"Come into the library," he said.

It was not until he had settled her in a comfortable chair by the library fire and poured out two glasses of sherry that he said, "Well, now, this is a very unexpected pleasure. I thought you didn't approve of visiting me."

"I had to come," she said slowly. "Paul, do you remember what you said to me this morning?"

"It's not the kind of thing that slips one's mind in a matter of hours, my dear," he answered with a dry smile.

"I asked you for time to think about it. That was very wrong of me. I came to tell you that I can't marry you, Paul."

"I see." Whatever his emotions were, they were not reflected in his face. "Are you sure that is your final decision?" he asked gently.

"Yes, quite sure."

There was a long silence while he contemplated the amber liquid in his glass.

At last he said, "It's odd the way life works out. When you first came here I believe I could have made you love me. You hadn't begun to care for David then. At that time I thought of you as just a beautiful and rather intriguing girl. By the time I found out that you were more than that, much more, I'd lost my chance. Well, that's the way it goes."

He tossed his cigarette into the fire.

"What happens now?"

"I'm leaving . . . on Saturday. I . . . things came to a head this morning. It's better to go as soon as possible."

"Have you got anywhere to go to?"

"No, but I shall soon find another job."

"Was it because of what happened at the dance?"

"Partly. It would have happened sooner or later."

"What a fool David is," he said with the first trace of bitterness.

Clare stood up.

"Good-bye, Paul. Thank you for all your kindness to

me. I wish it hadn't to end like this."

He smiled. "Perhaps it has been worth it. At least you restored my faith in women. Write to me if you ever have a spare moment. I should like to hear how things are going with you."

He took her hands in his and looked down at her pale, unhappy face. Then he put his arms round her and kissed her on the cheek.

"Take care of yourself, my dear. If you should ever change your mind. . . ."

He let her go, and, half-blinded by tears of pity and regret for having hurt him, she ran out of the room, snatched up her mackintosh and let herself out.

It was raining more heavily now, and by the time she reached Creek House her hair was plastered to her forehead and a trickle of water was seeping down between her shoulder-blades.

As she crossed the hall Miss Lancaster called, "Is that you, Clare?"

She paused in the sitting-room doorway.

"Good gracious, how wet you are! Run up and change. Hilda has just made some coffee, so don't be long."

Clare hurried upstairs and spread her mackintosh on the towel-horse. She changed her shoes, dried her face, and, without bothering to retouch her make-up, went down to the sitting-room.

"I'm just about to unveil my work of art," Miss Lancaster said, waving her hand towards the canvas which was propped against the bookcase, still covered by its muslin wrapper.

"Oh, do hurry up, Aunt Leo," Jenny urged her. "I'm longing to see it."

Miss Lancaster put down her cup and moved across to the bookcase. Then with a swift, dramatic gesture she threw back the wrapper and stood aside.

To Clare, the next few moments seemed interminable.

She had had no idea that the old lady intended to make a ceremony, and was acutely embarrassed, not only for herself but for David, who would be obliged to make some comment.

“Gosh, it’s marvellous!”

Jenny was the first to break the silence.

“And what is your opinion, David?” Miss Lancaster asked.

He studied the picture with narrowed eyes.

“It’s a clever piece of work,” he said briefly, and then, with a murmured apology, he stood up and walked out of the room.

Miss Lancaster watched him go and a faint smile lingered round her mouth.

*

Clare’s last few days at Creek House dragged past. She wrote to a reputable employment agency in London asking them to find a vacancy for her, although she had more or less made up her mind to join her brother in Kenya. During their working hours David maintained a cold courtesy and she, in turn, made a determined effort to behave as if the situation was a normal one.

On the morning of her last day he said suddenly, “Have you enough money to keep you going until you get another job?”

“Yes, thank you,” she said politely.

He looked at her for a moment with an expression which she could not construe. Then he gave a slight shrug and resumed his dictation.

That evening Clare was packing the last of her things when there was a piercing shriek from below. She rushed downstairs and met Hilda coming out of the sitting-room as if the devil were after her.

“What’s the matter?” Clare asked sharply.

"Oh, miss, it gave me such a turn! Who could have done such a wicked thing? What'll Miss Lancaster say? I couldn't believe my eyes. Dear, oh dear, there will be a to-do when I tell her."

"What has happened? What are you talking about?" Clare asked bewilderedly.

"Why, the picture, miss." Hilda mopped her brow with the hem of her apron and sank down on one of the hall chairs.

"What about the picture?"

"It's got a great hole in the middle of it. The size of a plate. All that work wasted. Miss Lancaster will be upset."

Clare darted into the sitting-room. The canvas was still standing on the bookcase, but as Hilda had said there was a jagged hole where the face had been.

She stared at it in horror. Who . . . ?

She felt a hand on her arm and, turning, found Miss Lancaster beside her.

"I was rather afraid this would happen," the old lady said quietly.

"You mean . . . you expected it?" Clare asked in astonishment.

"In a way it's quite a tribute to my skill."

"I don't understand. Why should someone break in and ruin a painting? Oughtn't we to call the police?"

"Nobody has broken in," Miss Lancaster said calmly. "This is what I believe they call 'an inside job'. It's annoying to have one of my best pieces of work spoilt, but I knew the risk, of course."

It flashed through Clare's mind that the shock must have unhinged Miss Lancaster's brain. But before she had time to think what she must do, Miss Lancaster said, "Don't you see, my dear? David is the culprit."

"David?" Clare gasped. "But that's impossible. Why should David do such a terrible thing? Oh no! It doesn't

make sense!"

"I imagine he found it . . . irritating . . . and acted on impulse. He has a very violent temper in certain circumstances. It's just as well I sent Jenny to the post. We'll put the wreckage away before she gets back. She's too young to understand how these things happen."

Dazedly Clare watched her lift the ruined portrait down from the bookcase and lock it away in a cupboard. Then she patted Clare's shoulder.

"Don't take it to heart, my dear."

Clare raised an agonised face.

"Does he hate me so much?" she whispered piteously.

"He didn't spoil the picture because he hates you," Miss Lancaster said gently. "Don't you see, my child, he loves you. For years he has let the memory of an old hurt corrode his heart. Now his pride will not let him admit that he is vulnerable again."

"But what can I do?" Clare whispered.

"You could go to him now and tell him you love him."

"Oh no!" she protested. "No, I could never do that."

"Because of your pride?" Miss Lancaster asked. "One of you must sacrifice that if you are to have happiness. Pride is the enemy of love, my child. Many hearts have been broken because pride was stronger than love."

Lying in bed that night – the last night she would spend in the little room under the eaves – Clare thought over what Miss Lancaster had said. She had come upstairs before David had returned, and she wondered what he and his aunt would have to say to each other.

Was it possible that love had prompted him to strike out blindly at the picture? Or was it hatred? Hatred because she had disturbed the even tenor of his life and revived memories which he had striven to forget?

"I don't know! I don't know!" she whispered into the darkness.

The next morning she carried her luggage downstairs and went in to breakfast in her travelling suit. David was not at the table. Surely he would not let her leave without saying good-bye?

She found it difficult to make conversation or to eat much.

At a quarter to ten Hilda brought her a lunch-basket.

"Good-bye, miss. I'm sorry you're leaving. I hope you'll be happy in your new job."

"Good-bye, Hilda dear. Thank you for mothering me. I shan't forget your wonderful cooking."

Hilda wrung her hand and went back to the kitchen.

"Where *can* Uncle David be?" Jenny said anxiously. "He knows the bus goes at ten."

"I think, if you don't mind, I'd rather go to the bus-stop alone," Clare said to Miss Lancaster. "Farewells are always a bit depressing."

"Of course, my dear. Do let me know how you get on. Whatever else may happen, I shall always think of you affectionately."

"Thank you. Thank you for everything, dear Aunt Leo," Clare said huskily, kissing her withered cheek. "I'd better go now. Goodbye, Jenny. Don't forget that post-card from Bangkok. I'll let you have my address. Good-bye, Josh."

She gave Jenny a quick hug, patted the dog and almost ran out of the room, her eyes misted with tears.

In the hallway stood David, her suitcase and grip in his hands.

Too overwrought to speak, Clare walked past him and out of the front door. By the time they reached the bus-stop she had recovered herself sufficiently to say, "Thank you. I'm afraid it's rather a heavy load."

"Much too heavy for you to carry," he said. "You should be able to get a porter at Greenstaithe, or the conductor will probably help you."

“Yes.”

This is the moment she thought. The moment when I could sacrifice my pride and tell him that I love him. But surely if he loves me he will see it in my eyes.

The bus rumbled along the road and groaned to a halt. David handed her cases up to the conductor; then he turned to her, his hand outstretched.

She took it, and everything she felt for him was written on her face.

“Good-bye. I hope you settle down again satisfactorily he said.

“Good-bye . . . David.”

He let go of her hand and she climbed up the steps and took her seat. The bus began to move. She did not look back.

CHAPTER XIII

"ARE you all right, miss?"

The words registered in Clare's mind with no more significance than a chance remark overheard in a crowded bus. It was not until a hand tapped her shoulder and the question was repeated that she realised a policeman was standing beside her. She stared blankly at the kindly face beneath the domed helmet.

"Feeling ill, miss?"

She shook her head, bewildered.

"No. I . . . I was just thinking."

"I should go home if I were you. No point in staying out in the rain unless you're obliged to."

With the confused reactions of someone who has been completely lost to their surroundings, she saw that there was a bloom of moisture on his cape.

"I didn't notice it was raining," she said awkwardly.

"Set in for the night by the looks of it." He gave her a keen glance. "Not stranded, are you, miss?"

"Oh no. No, of course not," she assured him hastily.

He nodded, evidently satisfied. "If you take my advice, you'll have a hot drink as soon as you get in. It doesn't do to stand about in the wet, you know."

"Yes . . . yes, I will. Good night, officer." Clare managed a smile and hurried away, conscious of his eyes following her. No wonder he had asked if she was all right. Only vagrants and lunatics loitered by the river on a night like this. How long had she stood there, half hypnotised by the dark water swirling under the bridge? Ten minutes? Half an hour? The shoulders of her jacket were soaked and her skirt clung damply to her legs.

I must get a grip on myself, she thought fiercely. It's

over. It was all over a week ago. There's no point in brooding. Forget it, you fool. Forget there ever was a village called Clint and a man named David. . . .

David! The name was like a barb piercing a raw wound. How long – how many dreary months – before the wound healed?

Her mouth contracted with pain and she quickened her pace as if to outstrip her thoughts.

A couple standing at a bus-stop gazed at her with open curiosity, their attention arrested by the naked anguish on her pale face.

Clare walked past them, deaf to their murmured speculations. For a week – ever since the interminable journey back to London – she had lived in a leaden trance of misery, cut off from the world around her by a despair so acute that the future seemed a hopeless void and the effort of facing it almost beyond her.

She had found accommodation in a drab Bayswater lodging-house, and during the day she walked for mile after mile along the river-side until physical exhaustion forced her to return to her shabby room. Even then she often lay awake in the dragging small hours, her mind tormented by a hundred memories from which there seemed no escape.

The landlady had already rebuked her for coming in late, and she began to run, dreading another encounter with that sharp-faced harridan. Perhaps a note from the airline would be waiting. They had promised to book her passage to Kenya as soon as possible. The prospect of joining Hal was her one faint gleam of hope. Perhaps in Africa, surrounded by people and places that had no relation to the past, she would be able to forget to start afresh.

Many single women lived happy, useful lives. Time hardened, even if it could never wholly heal, the scars of experience, and perhaps one day she would wake up and find that memory had lost its power to torture her, that

what now seemed an inescapable agony had become a shadow, a faint regret for all that might have been.

What might have been. The saddest words in the world. Her hands clenched so that her nails dug into her palms. Dear God, don't let me think, please don't let me think. Oh, David, my darling, why couldn't you love me? Why did it all go wrong? What was it that made you hate me while I loved you so desperately?

At the corner of the road leading to her lodgings she slowed down. A church clock struck eleven and she bit her lip nervously.

Mrs. Hardleigh would have locked the front door by now and would be furious at being disturbed. She might even refuse to let her in. Last time Clare had been late she had made several nasty remarks about the respectability of her establishment and lodgers who failed to maintain the tone of the house.

Bracing herself to meet an outburst of righteous indignation from Mrs. Hardleigh, Clare tried the door. As she had feared, it was locked. She was about to lift the heavy brass knocker when a sound from the road made her swing round.

For a moment she did not recognise the tall figure who stood there. Then, with a stifled cry, she fainted.

When Clare regained consciousness, she was lying on a couch in a strange room. Struggling to sit up, she found herself pushed gently back into a mound of soft cushions.

"Just lie still for a while," David Lancaster said quietly. "There's nothing to worry about. You passed out and caught your head a nasty crack, but everything's going to be all right now."

He sat down on the edge of the couch, and she gazed up wonderingly at the strong dark face which she had thought never to see again.

"David, I don't understand. Why are you here?" she asked weakly.

He took her hands in his. "Because I had to find you, Clare," he said in a low voice.

"But . . . why?"

"To ask you to marry me."

She closed her eyes. It was a dream. It couldn't possibly be real. He was lost to her for ever. This was just a dream born of her longing and unhappiness. Her whole body began to tremble uncontrollably, and all the tears she had not been able to shed during the past seven days and nights suddenly welled up and poured down her cheeks.

"Oh, my darling, don't cry like that." He gathered her into his arms and held her close, appalled at the violence of her weeping.

At last the storm of grief slackened, and she lay, lax and spent, against his shoulder.

"Clare, can you ever forgive me?" His voice was husky, "God knows, I don't deserve it after the way I behaved. It took this last week to show me what a blind fool I've been. I nearly went crazy when I realised I might have lost you for ever. Until you went away I never knew it was possible to love a woman so much that life was unbearable without her."

Slowly she raised her face to his. "You love me? You really love me?"

"More than anything or anyone in the world, and, if you'll let me, I'll spend the rest of my life proving it."

"Oh . . . !" With a gasp of joy she buried her face against him. "I can't believe it's true," she said in a muffled voice. "I've longed for you so. I thought I should die of longing. Tell me I'm not dreaming, David; you're really here and this is really happening."

"I'm really here, sweetheart," he said gently. "I've found you and I'll never let you go again."

For several minutes she lay still, feeling a glow of exquisite happiness radiating through every nerve.

"Clare . . . look at me!" He slipped a hand under her

chin and raised her face.

"I must look a sight!" she protested shakily.

"You look the most beautiful woman in the world," he told her softly.

A light tap at the door disturbed them.

David frowned. "Damn, that'll be the doctor. I thought we'd better call him in, darling, just in case you've got a spot of concussion. Come in, Mrs. Rogers."

An elderly woman put her head round the door.

"Doctor Maclean is here, Mr. David."

"Right, show him in, will you? Miss Drake seems to be all right now, but it's as well to make sure."

Mrs. Rogers retreated and David said, "Just in case you're wondering where you are, pet, this is my brother James's flat. You remember he interviewed you for the post as my secretary."

Before he could explain any more the doctor, a brisk old Scotsman, was ushered in. Clare submitted to an examination of her head. She winced as the doctor's exploring fingers touched the bruised place.

"Humph, nothing to worry about there," he said reassuringly. "You'll probably have the devil of a headache later on, young lady, but your skull seems to be intact. Takes a lot to break 'em, you know. How did you come by this accident?"

"She fainted and banged her head as she fell," David said.

"Fainted, eh?" The doctor felt her pulse, eyeing her appraisingly. "When was your last meal, my girl?"

"I don't really remember. This morning, I think," Clare stammered.

"What did you have?"

"Oh, a piece of toast and some tea. I wasn't very hungry."

"By the look of it, you've been half starving yourself for several days," he said sternly.

Clare flushed scarlet and cast an appealing look at David.

"She'll be all right now," he said easily. "We'll soon feed her up, doctor. Mrs. Rogers is a first-rate cook."

"See that you do. A day or two in bed is what she needs," the doctor advised.

When he had taken his leave after a gruff but not unkindly homily on the dangers of going without proper meals, David made her lie back on the couch while he went to fetch the light supper which the housekeeper had prepared.

"Eat as much as you can, my dear," he urged, setting down the tray on a small table beside the couch. "It's my fault that you're in this state. I deserve to be flogged. God, when I think that I might never have found you. . . ."

"How did you?" she asked, sipping some excellent hot broth.

"I scoured half the hotels in London, and then I remembered what you had said about joining your brother and I went to the airline offices. They were very sticky about giving me your address, but I managed to bludgeon it out of them. Your landlady wouldn't let me wait in the house – she seemed highly suspicious of me for some reason – so I hung about the street until you came back."

"Heavens, all my things are there. She'll never take me in again now," Clare cried in alarm.

"I wouldn't dream of letting you go back to such a place. You're staying here. Mrs. Rogers lives in, so it's perfectly respectable. We can fetch your gear in the morning. I'll soon settle the old girl if she wants a row," he said firmly.

"I was expecting to get my passage at any moment. Oh, David, if you hadn't come in time. . . ."

"Thank God I did. You're shivering. What is it? Are you cold? I'll fetch a blanket."

"No, it's just reaction, I think," she said quickly. "You see, I gave up hope the morning we said good-bye. It was like leaving part of myself behind. Why did you let me go? Why didn't you say you loved me then?"

He sighed. "I don't know, Clare. Pride, I suppose. It doesn't make sense now."

There was a moment's silence while he stared thoughtfully into space, his face sombre. For the first time she noticed how drawn and haggard he looked.

"There are many things I have to explain to you," he said at last. "Most of them can wait, but there's one part I'd like to tell you now if you're not too worn out."

She shook her head, guessing what was to come.

"A long time ago I was engaged to a girl called Caroline Lyall," he said. "It was actually nothing more than a boyish infatuation, but I didn't know at the time. She was very lovely, and I was dazzled by her looks and never stopped to consider what she was like inside. That was while I was still at University. We were to be married when I got my degree. Instead, I wound up in hospital with my back in plaster – a Rugger injury."

He paused and, sensing his distaste for reviving past history, Clare reached out and took his hand.

"On what should have been our wedding-day," David continued, "I received a letter to say it had all been a mistake. She was very sorry, but she was going to marry someone else. I found out later he was a rich business tycoon, old enough to be her father."

Although his tone was matter of fact as though the incident had long since lost its sting, Clare felt a wave of fierce anger at the girl who had behaved so heartlessly.

"I suppose I took it badly because I was ill," he went on. "Had I been up and about there would have been no time for brooding. But, lying in hospital for eight weeks, I had nothing to do but think. By the time I was on my feet I'd sworn never to let another woman make a fool

of me again. You see, Caroline was the first woman I'd ever really known, and I took it for granted that they were all tarred with the same brush. Can you possibly understand that?"

For answer she lifted his hand and cradled it against her cheek. In the light of her own recent despair it was easy to visualise the bitter cynicism which must have engulfed him at being so callously jilted at the very time when he needed comfort. No wonder he had come to regard all women as selfish and avaricious.

"As soon as I saw you I knew you were everything a man could want." His fingers tightened round hers. "I forced myself to be brusque and unfriendly – and all the time I was falling in love with you. That night we found Josh in the quarry I almost blurted out the truth. Then I remembered Caroline and lost my nerve. If you were less attractive it might have been easier, but your looks – your hair and your eyes and your lovely figure – were a constant reminder of the mistake I'd made before. When I thought you were falling for Paul, I was half crazy with jealousy. He had everything to offer a woman –"

"Not for me, David," she cut in swiftly. "All I wanted was you. That's why I went out with him. I thought that if you did care for me, jealousy would break down your pride. I couldn't know that it was the very way to make things worse."

"Can you really forgive me for thinking you were just another gold-digger?" he asked humbly.

"There isn't anything to forgive. Look at all the horrible things I said to you. Oh, what does it matter *now*? The miracle is that it has a happy ending."

"A happy beginning," he corrected. "With luck the happy ending will be about fifty years ahead."

"A few hours ago I was resigning myself to being a spinster," she said rather tremulously.

"Heaven forbid! In fact, as soon as I can get a licence

you'll be a bride. You don't want an elaborate wedding, do you?"

She shook her head, laughing. "Just a wedding, David."

"Finish up those sandwiches. It's after midnight; time you were tucked up," he told her.

"Where is your brother?" Clare asked, obediently eating the last of the wafer-thin chicken sandwiches.

"Out at some dignified legal dinner," David said.

"Are you sure he won't mind my staying here?"

"Of course not. You'll be his sister-in-law in a few days. Finished? I'll call Mrs. Rogers to give you a hand."

"I'm not an invalid," she protested.

"Don't argue," he said firmly. "From now on I'm not taking any risks with you, my sweet."

"It sounds so odd to hear you calling me that," she said dreamily. "I used to wonder what it would be like, but somehow I could never imagine you calling anyone 'darling'. You were always so dreadfully stern."

"Only on the surface. There were times when I could hardly keep myself from flinging that wretched typewriter out of the window and making violent love to you."

"Really? I was just wondering if you were ever going to kiss me," she said impishly.

"Doctor Maclean said it would be best if you led a quiet life for the next day or two. No excitement or emotional disturbances." His expression was serious, but there was a glint of mocking laughter in his eyes.

"Oh," Her face fell.

"Clare, you little idiot!" He burst out laughing. "Do you think I could possibly last out for two days without kissing you?" He bent towards her and with a sigh of contentment she yielded to his strong arms.

*

The villa stood on a cliff above a private beach. The

sound of the sea whispered through the room like peaceful music.

All day the sun shone with Mediterranean brilliance, and by night the garden was drenched in moonlight. By the end of the first week Clare knew that from now on the word "paradise" would evoke a secret vision of this secluded stretch of the Italian Riviera.

Standing on the balcony, watching the sunset cast its fiery reflection on the calm sea, she felt sure, that, whatever the future might bring, the memory of her present happiness could never be spoiled.

"Clare . . . where are my cuff-links?"

Smiling, she turned back into the bedroom. David was bending over the dressing-table, searching in her cosmetics tray.

"I believe you've hidden them," he accused her. "I haven't been able to find anything since we've been married.

"Regretting your rashness?"

"Not entirely." He caught hold of the sash of her *négligée* and pulled her towards him. "How about you? Any regrets?"

She made a doubtful face.

"It's too early to say. Ask me again in six months. Heavens, look at the time. I must dress or we shall be late." She twitched the sash out of his hand and darted away before he could catch her. "Your cuff-links are in that china box on the tallboy."

"You aren't going to do your hair in that bun thing, are you?" he asked as she picked up her comb.

"Yes, I was. Why?"

"I like it better the way it is now."

He came up behind her and buried his hands in the thick silky masses of her hair.

"You look like a gipsy girl with it loose. The other way is too prim."

"I thought it would be more suitable for a dinner party. Signora Riviera is terribly elegant."

"She isn't half as lovely as you are." He bent and kissed the smooth curve of her shoulder. "Damn the dinner party! I'd much rather stay here."

Clare laughed. "What an anti-social creature you are. I was hoping marriage would cure you." Her face softened. "We needn't stay too late, darling, and the Rivas are an awfully nice couple."

"I know they are." His lips strayed to her cheek. "I just don't want to spend my honeymoon fostering Anglo-Italian relations."

"But you—" Her words were clipped short as his mouth found hers.

"That'll teach you to argue with your lord and master," he teased when, some minutes later, she opened her eyes and gazed rapturously at him. "Now, get on with your dressing, woman, or we really will be late."

Clare reached dreamily for her powder-puff. When David kissed her like that it gave her the curious sensation that her bones were melting.

He was an ardent and demanding lover, and it amazed her that she should ever have thought him stiff and unemotional. Sometimes she felt that she had married a stranger, for as the long golden days passed a new David gradually revealed himself. She had loved him when he was at his most curt and off-hand, but now she discovered that her husband had an unexpected capacity for nonsense, a boyish hilarity which before he had kept strictly controlled. With other people he was still quiet and self-contained, but with her he was all tenderness and warm

She had accepted that there would always be a part of himself which he would withhold from her, but instead she found herself in possession of his whole heart.

"Why that solemn expression?" he asked, catching her eyes on him.

Clare shrugged off her *négligée* and slipped her dress over her head before replying.

"I was just thinking how very differently things might have turned out," she said quietly.

He watched her put the finishing touches to her appearance.

"Come on to the balcony for a moment," he said. "We've got a few minutes to spare."

Side by side they leant against the balustrade and watched the last rosy wisps of cloud fade into the darkening sky.

"Do you remember how we once talked about finding a retreat from the world?" David asked slowly.

"You mean the rapture on the lonely shore?" she murmured, remembering the evening when they had sat on the beach at Clint and for the first time he had relaxed his guard. "You also talked about 'confusing the practical issues of marriage with a lot of emotional nonsense'," she reminded him.

A wry smile touched his mouth. "You don't have to remind me what a crass idiot I was, sweetheart."

"Have you given up the idea of a desert island, then?"

He took her hand and raised it to his lips. "I realise now that a desert island isn't the solution. You've given me what I was searching for."

She laid her head against his shoulder. "Life is rather like a lonely shore," she said. "But I think Byron was wrong. The rapture is when you find someone to share it and you know you'll never be lonely again."